

**Proper 21 C    Taking a Troll Out to Lunch    September 25, 2016**

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Journalist, best-selling author, and regular contributor to TIME Magazine Joel Stein took a troll out to lunch. This proved an unusual, brave, and effective way of addressing a growing culture of anger and hate on the internet. These days trolls are not fictional characters from fairy tales, Tolkien trilogies, or Disney movies. Today a troll is a person who makes derogatory, obscene, and violent comments on social media sites like Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube, among others. The term was inspired by a fishing technique called trolling that is also how on-line thieves bait vulnerable individuals.

In his August 29 article on trolls, Stein describes trolls as people who are quick to defend themselves as just looking for laughs or are the only people brave enough to speak the truth, and if anyone finds their version of the truth offensive then the trolls simply dismiss the offended as weak or stupid. According to Joel Stein, trolls have discovered that their cruel and violent comments are often perceived as threats and this has given them a sense of power, and it is a power they are enjoying with relish. It is also contributing to a culture of hate that is causing a change in social media where people are now becoming increasingly fearful of sharing personal news or opinions, which was the original intention of social networking sites like Facebook, and are instead sharing articles, news stories, opinion stories, and memes, turning social networking into social media. The hate speak of trolls is creating a distance, or chasm between people on social media instead of fostering a culture of sharing and connection.

Stein discovered all this through research, interviewing victims of trolls, those who try and stand up to trolls, and the trolls themselves. The one that seemed to make the most meaningful impression on him was a woman named Megan Koester, who he knew as his own troll. She had mostly interacted through Twitter, tweeting vicious slander against his journalism skills. Then one day, while eating at a restaurant, she tweeted that she was at the same restaurant and in her tweet called him to step outside so she could beat him up. He admits that shook him up. He didn't bite at that moment, but later invited her out to lunch thinking she'd refuse. To his surprise, she accepted his invitation. At lunch he learned a lot about Megan: that she is struggling in her career as a freelance writer and comedian who survives on sporadic paychecks and food stamps and

that most of her criticism of him was mostly her jealousy of his successes and projection of her disappointment, frustration, and struggle in her own life. When Joel asked why she didn't follow through with her threat of violence and hit him, he wrote that she looked at him like he was an idiot and said that the internet is "the realm of the coward...people who are all sound and no fury".

Joel Stein's lunch with a troll brought a few things to light about internet trolls: that these are people who feel angry and frustrated with inequality or societal change or other things that also make them feel powerless and are expressing their feelings in a way that makes them feel powerful. They are refusing to be quiet about chasms that exist in our world, even though the way they are choosing to express themselves is in fact creating a deeper, wider chasm that makes others afraid to participate in their same right of free speech. At the same time, Joel Stein's lunch with a troll named Megan was a step toward making that chasm a little smaller by first noticing the chasm and recognizing the troll as a person.

Joel Stein's lunch with a troll reminded me of today's Gospel, and Jesus' parable about two men: one without a name but with a great deal of wealth, status, importance, and extravagance, and one named Lazarus who had nothing but sores, hunger, and loneliness. Remember, this is a parable, not a moral tale, and parables can be stories that invite us to think and to wonder what Jesus was trying to get at when he told them.

This parable about two men was told in Luke's Gospel in part of Jesus' response to criticism he had received about who he talked with and ate with from the Pharisees, who Luke described as "lovers of money". In Jesus' day there was an understanding that having wealth, possessions and important positions were considered to be signs of being in God's favor, that God liked you better than someone else, and that you were guaranteed entrance into God's reward. In Jesus' day, though, the wealthy were also expected to use their wealth to help the poor with acts of generous charity, because it was believed the purpose of wealth was to share it. But many scholars doubt such charity was actually happening in those days, causing an ever growing distance between the poor and the wealthy. Some of us might say such a distance is present even today.

Which means we might appreciate this parable Jesus told of two men who although they encountered each other every day, as Lazarus was literally at the rich man's gate, there was not a connection between them, and they were really quite far apart. This comes to light in the parable after both had died, and

contrary to popular belief, it turned out wealth wasn't necessarily a sign of God's favor and didn't guarantee a reward. Perhaps one of the suggestions of this parable is that wealth is neither proof of God's blessing nor a sign of personal capability or success. Perhaps the parable is suggesting wealth is something more ambivalent, like a tool, and what is important is how a person uses it instead of whether or not a person has it.

It is important to note that does not mean poverty will be rewarded by God either, so there is no benefit to keeping people poor. It does seem God has special interest in the poor, notice it is the beggar, Lazarus who is given a name in this parable. Perhaps God does not like that people are poor, because perhaps poverty is glaring evidence that too many people are not living the love of God.

Did you notice the rich man's behavior after he died and was buried? I find it funny because it seems to me he was trying to run heaven from hades by telling Abraham to tell Lazarus what to do. It seems even after death the rich man didn't get it. So Abraham had to explain it to him by pointing out the chasm between them. Isn't it interesting that the word used is 'chasm', something that is enormous, too wide or big to get across. It is a distance no bridge can span. There is no hope of connection from one side of a chasm to another. This chasm, it seems in the parable, is not a punishment in the afterlife, but something very much in existence in this life, something created and maintained in this world by people who want to keep a safe distance from whatever they want to keep a safe distance from.

In Jesus parable, death did not bring Lazarus and the rich man together, it just reversed their situations. Sort of like Mary's proclamation earlier in Luke's Gospel after the angel Gabriel told her she was going to have a baby and she sang how through Jesus' birth the poor would be filled with good things while the rich would be sent away empty. I don't believe Luke is saying God now hates rich people. Instead it is a reversal of the idea that wealth is a sign of God's favor while poverty is a sign of God's anger or displeasure. Which can mean that this parable of two men is one way Jesus could have been talking about who he is and what God is up to through him. Jesus came to show us God loves all people, the rich and the poor, the successful and the struggling, the privileged and those who aren't, people of all races, genders, ages, political parties, those who stand up for justice and those who are afraid to speak up, because, you know, trolls are everywhere waiting to strike, especially at the edges of the chasms that still do exist in our world. And today's parable can remind us God loves trolls too.

So thank God Jesus came to do more than just show us God loves us all, Jesus came to show us that God loves us so much, there isn't a chasm too great for God to reach us, not even death, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, will separate us from God's love in Christ. However, as Paul also said in his letter to a young man named Timothy who was struggling to lead a church that we also heard this morning, there are things that will keep us from accepting God's tremendous love. One of those things Paul mentioned is the love of money. But it could just as easily be the love of politics, or the love of material things, or the love of position, or the love of food, or the love of anything we want to keep to ourselves that can still create a distance between us and God and between us and each other. We can see these kinds of chasms today in the violent acts that lead to more distrust between authority and black people. Or between the government and indigenous peoples of this country, as we are seeing at Standing Rock reservation. We don't have to look hard to see these chasms still exist.

So does that mean there is no hope? I don't believe so. Because unlike the rich man in Jesus' parable, a real man named Joel Stein took a troll out to lunch and discovered she is a real human being, a woman named Megan Koester struggling to live into her dreams and talents who is willing to make sacrifices and suffer and to meet with the person she is jealous of. Both of them were willing to be open, humble, honest, and kind which helped shrink the chasm between them. Believe it or not, that is Kingdom of God work, that simple, brave invitation and acceptance of the invitation is what we followers of Christ are called to do: to live God's healing love by seeing those chasms which contribute to so much of the pain and suffering people experience and once we see them to do what we can to heal those chasms by bridging the distance one step at a time.

For many churches in many denominations, including the Episcopal Church, today is also social media Sunday: a day we are invited to share our faith through social media. Today the church is inviting us to tweet sermons, check in at church services, Instagram selfies in church buildings, and other fun things like that. I am not sure how active any of you are on social media, and if you are there is nothing wrong with these suggestions, they are one way to participate in the world of social media. But we also have those trolls, who are people like Megan who remind us not everyone will like our posts, and that is okay, especially if we remember their anger is more about them, and that means we could use today as an opportunity to not only post where we are and what we are doing but to share something a little more meaningful. We could reflect on the ways we engage or

don't in the comment sections of friends Facebook posts, and how our presence on social media sites can be an expression of our faith by what we share or comments we make. Are we giving in to our own inner troll, or are we able to share our opinions and perspectives with kindness and humbleness? This is still new undiscovered territory where rules are not well established, so it can be a bit scary to engage, but as the presence of trolls shows us, it is also a place where the love of God in Christ is needed, which means it is an opportunity for us to share God's love.

For those who don't participate in social media, there is still plenty of opportunities for you to share God's healing love wherever you are because those chasms might be evident on social media but they exist in our world where anyone of us can go to lunch with someone we disagree with, or share our resources with those in need, to listen to the hurting, to forgive as God forgives us, to do what we can to open the ways for God's love to heal any chasms in the world and when we are open to the possibilities of God's love who knows how many ways we'll discover to take a troll out to lunch and see with the eyes of God's love, the beloved child of God before us.