

There is a sad and lovely line from the 1977 movie *O, God!* that gets to the heart of the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel. For those who need a refresher or those who have yet to see it, *O, God!* is a movie about a man named Jerry Landers played by singer, songwriter, activist, and actor John Denver who God, played by comedian and actor George Burns, recruits to give a message of hope to the world. The screenplay was written by Larry Gelbart who adapted it from the 1971 novel by the same title and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Despite the obvious references to the time period with the cars, wardrobe, and pop culture references, the movie has a timeless quality to it and its message is as relevant today as it was 45 years ago. This message was summed up by the character of God in the movie when God said, "I know how hard it is in these times to have faith. But maybe if you could have the faith to start with, maybe the times would change. You could change them. Think about it. Try. And try not to hurt each other. There's been enough of that. It really gets in the way. I'm a God of very few words and Jerry's already given you mine. However hopeless, helpless, mixed up and scary it all gets, it can work. If you find it hard to believe in me, maybe it would help you to know that I believe in you."

Those are some good lines. But the one that reminded me of the parable in today's Gospel came a little earlier in the movie when God took the witness stand in a trial trying to prove Jerry Landers was incompetent because he was talking and listening to God. This was something hard for people to believe, so God showed up and shared some wisdom about why people might be struggling to hear what God was saying through Jerry Landers. God wondered if they were expecting something more miraculous. "I'm not sure how this whole miracle business started," God said, "the idea that anything connected with me has to be a miracle. Personally, I'm sorry that it did. Makes the distance between us even greater."

*Makes the distance between us even greater.* That is the line that reminded me of the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel. There are many things happening in the parable and Biblical scholars assure us this parable was intended for a specific group: the pharisees who were "lovers of money". And there are some decent sermons preached on the warning this parable gives to individuals and institutions alike on how to use resources to bridge the distance between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots. There is nothing wrong with that message. It's a good

one, and I suspect it is one most of us are already well aware of. We try to use what resources we have to help support people or organizations that help those who need it.

Perhaps there is more to this parable that can make it be for all of us, not just the lovers of money. Maybe this isn't a parable that is only about money and how to share it. Maybe this parable is about those chasms, those distances, what divides us and invites us to bridge those gaps, heal the divides, and can lessen the distances between each other and between us and God.

In the parable Jesus gave several details about what divided the character Lazarus (who is not the same person as the man Jesus raised from the dead in John's Gospel) from the character without a name simply called the rich man. The rich man seemed to be so distracted by consuming he didn't notice or pay attention to what was on the other side of his door or the walls around his house. Perhaps what made the distance greater was what the rich man loved: not just his money but what his money got him: status, prestige, and abundance. There was and still is the belief that things like wealth and good health are signs a person is favored by God above others. This belief can make it difficult for those who subscribe to it to respect the dignity of people who have fewer resources and whose health is not so good. The very idea that God prefers someone over another contributes to the distance between people and people and God.

In Jesus' parable, things like wealth, status, privilege, and abundance were ambiguous. They were not the reason for the rich man's fate after his death, neither were they signs God thought the rich man was better than others. Most scholars agree the reversal of Lazarus and the rich man in the parable is symbolic of the eschatological reversal that will happen when God's Kingdom is finally fully realized here on earth. But what didn't change in the parable was the distance between the two characters. It was still there after both had died, and Jesus' parable infers the distance that might have been bridged or healed before their death was now permanent.

Which might make us wonder, what is powerful enough to bridge the gap? What could be strong enough to heal that which divides humanity and God? It isn't money. It isn't youth or beauty. It isn't technology. It isn't the right leader. It isn't age or wisdom. The thing that could have bridged the gap between Lazarus and the rich man is what was missing from the parable. Love. Not the kind of love people have for money or food or whatever they like to consume. It isn't romantic love. The love that is missing from the parable is the Love of God expressed in the practice of compassion.

I recently read that compassion has gotten sentimentalized so that it now means to feel pity or feel sorry for someone or something. However, this definition of compassion isn't helpful, because that is the kind of thinking that increases the distance between us by dehumanizing suffering by focusing on things like the unjust practices of institutions and corporations. Now, they still need to be called out for their poor actions, but not at the cost of the opportunity to bridge the distance when we can go deeper than pity and actually share the suffering of another person, which is the Biblical and theological definition of compassion.

It seems to me the rich man didn't only not pay attention to what going on outside his door, he failed to notice Lazarus' suffering. Perhaps the rich man, even with his wealth and status, couldn't fix the many corruptions and problems that put Lazarus in a state of extreme poverty and poor health, but there was certainly something he could have done for the one person outside his door. And if he had not only paid attention but let himself recognize and respect Lazarus as a person, then perhaps he would have felt a connection with him and done what he could to help restore Lazarus to health. Such a compassionate response might have made them friends, despite their different stations in life. Through compassion, they might have grown closer to each other and closer to God. Which is a choice we all have.

While it isn't a parable, the history of the Jingle Dress from the Mille Lac Band of the Ojibwe Tribe from Northern Wisconsin, Minnesota and the Great Lakes region in the US and Ontario, Canada gives us a vision of what it looks like to choose compassion. The Jingle Dress, which became prevalent in the 1900's and 1920's, is a colorful dress worn by women for ceremonial dances. For most Indigenous cultures, dancing is a form of prayer and connection with the Great Spirit, and not a form of partying or entertainment. The dresses are covered in small metal cones that make a jingle sound when they touch during the dance. The dance of the Jingle Dress is a dance of healing, hope, and community born out of compassion that bridges the distance between people and between God.

The history goes that a medicine man was distraught because his young granddaughter was ill and efforts to heal her failed. In a dream, the medicine man saw the Jingle Dress. It was presented to him by his spirit guide – a being who connects a person to their ancestors and the Great Spirit - who told him to make the dress for the child and if she danced in it, she would be healed. The Jingle Dress was made, and the tribe came together to watch the little girl dance. But she had become too ill to dance. So, the history goes, the tribe carried her while they danced; and as they danced, the child became well enough to join them, dancing on her own so that they were all dancing together. Today, the Jingle Dress is a both a

ritual of healing and pride. You can see Indigenous women wearing Jingle Dresses and dancing on YouTube, as this ritual is still practiced.

I love how this origin story of a dress and a dance is also a tale of compassion and how the love that was not afraid to enter into the suffering of another led to healing, and brought a tribe, a people closer together and closer to the Great Spirit. No wonder it is a source of pride, it shows how the words from the movie *O, God!* are true: “However hopeless, helpless, mixed up and scary it all gets, it can work.”

While Jesus’ parable shows us what the absence of compassion looks like, through his life, his suffering on the cross, his death and resurrection, he shows us God became incarnate to carry us, like the Mille Lac Band carried a child, to heal that distance between us, the distance between each other and between us and God. God is not afraid to enter into our suffering, which means we don’t have to be afraid to notice the suffering around us and carry those who need to be carried a bit, and it also means letting ourselves be carried at times. That is why we still wear face masks in the church and some of us continue to wear them in public. We are aware there are still people who are vulnerable to the ill effects of the Covid-19 virus and its variants and wearing masks is a way of carrying each other.

Perhaps that is also what inspired our vestry to use funds to help children in our local community, especially children of color. By partnering with Children’s Social Services, we were able to help a child attend a State competition when his parents couldn’t afford to get him to it. Where he placed in the competition doesn’t matter as much as he had the opportunity to try, and who knows where that might take him. We also were able to provide care for children whose mother is undergoing a long medical treatment process for cancer so that she could rest and receive the medical care she needs while the children still got the care they need. They might lack the jingle of a dress, but these actions are part of the same dance of compassion, of carrying each other. They don’t fix the problems of injustice that contribute to poverty and inequality, but they are a way of recognizing the suffering of those on the other side of our door and a step to bridging the distance between us.

Such a distance isn’t overcome quickly, but step by step, moment by moment, each act of compassion is love knitting us closer together, and God’s Kingdom coming closer to earth. It is also living proof that through the compassionate love of God, “however hopeless, helpless, mixed up and scary it all gets, it can – and does – work.”