

Heidi Hall died 4 days ago on Wednesday, September 25, from colorectal cancer. She was only 49 years old. Despite having a successful career as an award-winning journalist, I had not heard of her until 3 days ago on Thursday, September 26, when Religion News Service published her very last article titled: "Finding a Faith that is Stronger than Death – or my family's rejection." Her message, written not long before her death, is a powerful account of one person's life-long work of bridging the chasms in life and discovering the beauty and joy of resurrection living.

Heidi began her story by sharing why she was rejected by her family. She was in her early 20's, having grown up in the Jehovah's Witness church, a religion that meant a great deal to her mother and stepfather. Her parents wanted their religion to mean a lot to her too, so they didn't allow her to get a college education and forced her to work as a witness going door to door in an attempt to convert others while she worked menial jobs to earn a living. Then she met a guy and the two of them, according to Heidi, did the sort of thing people in their 20's do. Not long after that she got a job as a reporter for a small local newspaper where one of her assignments was to interview a man who started an AIDS charity. It was the first time she had met an openly gay person and he helped her understand homosexuality is not the sinful choice her religion taught her it was.

She then began to question other tenants of the church she grew up in, and when she discussed these questions and confessed what she had been up to with that guy, her parents reported her to the board of elders who found her guilty of the unforgivable sin of unrepentance of fornication. The board excommunicated Heidi, making her dead not only to the church, but to her family and all members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They all cut her off, in the hopes that this punitive treatment would bring her to her senses, and she'd return to the fold.

Instead of making her want to return, the rejection made Heidi turn her back on her church and family and built a life without them. She married the guy, made friends, many of whom had also been hurt or disillusioned by the churches they grew up in. Heidi was angry at her mother, her family, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and decided to fix a chasm between her and all of them. She told people she was spiritual but not religious, which she herself confessed was a lie because she felt relieved to be above all that. She avoided people of all religions, and felt sorry for religious folks, wishing they, like her, could be as enlightened as she and escape from what she called "the sticky opium of the people."

Despite this attitude, the hurt inside her did not go away or heal. She wrote how it manifested itself as overworking, overeating, and drinking too much alcohol, what some might call the true “opium of the people”. Over time, she recognized the unhealth in her life and got help with these issues. But the issue of religion still lingered, and remained an untraversable chasm in her life, cutting her off from something she didn’t even know she needed until an opportunity to bridge that gap presented itself.

By that time Heidi was working for a newspaper in Nashville, Tennessee, temporarily filling in for the religion editor, when a local minister of a mainline denomination called to ask about having an essay he wrote printed in the paper. The minister invited Heidi to see his church building because of its rare Egyptian Revival architecture. She accepted his invitation because she felt it would be rude not to, and ended up enjoying their conversation, which was not about religion. Heidi and the minister enjoyed each other’s company so much, they agreed to meet for coffee, and religion never entered their second conversation, which impressed Heidi.

But when she couldn’t avoid it any longer, Heidi finally brought up the topic of religion and was surprised the minister didn’t let her off the hook when she told him she was spiritual but not religious – he told her that was like saying you play football but are not on a team. And when she expressed her feelings about how the church she grew up in treated LBGTQ people, the minister assured her that his denomination and many other mainline denominations like the Episcopal Church are inclusive of all people, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, economic and social status, color, political party, education level, and others. After that conversation, she up and joined that church, even though plenty of her friends refused to understand why she would do such a thing.

Heidi wrote how her new church’s expression of grace and unconditional love helped her heal from the religious wounds that had created so much anger in her. It even helped her forgive her mother by looking at her mother’s life with compassion and recognize how after her father left her mother – who had no job and no higher education - with three little girls under the age of 8 her mother turned to the Jehovah’s Witness church for stability. Heidi recognized that what worked for her mother would not work for her, and even though that was not enough for her mother to reconcile with Heidi, it was enough for Heidi to die without regret, because forgiveness is a powerful bridge and healing balm.

When Heidi learned her cancer diagnosis was terminal, her church again helped her bridge the chasm she had felt with God. Her mother had once told her sin caused a gap in the line of communication with God, rendering God unable to hear her when she prayed. But Heidi learned that is not true at all. No matter what we do, God wants

to hear us, because God loves us, and is always listening when we pray. In her moments of pain, she felt closer to God than ever before because of Jesus' suffering on the cross. God, Heidi wrote, knows what pain is not in an academic sense, but in the same way Heidi and – for that matter- any of us know pain by experience.

Ultimately, the purpose of the beautiful article Heidi wrote was to explain how she did not die alone. She was surrounded by friends who were there with her every step of the way. Some of them are gay, some are atheists, some are Muslims, and some she described as traditional church goers like herself. And that expression of God's Kingdom here on earth, in this life, is something for which Heidi is grateful. Heidi also wanted to express that she was glad she did the work of bridging those painful chasms in her life, which were created by deaths and bridged by resurrection life, which she called "a faith stronger than death".

This may be the very thing Jesus could have been pointing to in the parable in today's Gospel, where we see two men separated by a chasm in both life and death, and it seems to imply that once they died it was too late to bridge the distance between them. Many people have seen this parable as a warning to make sure you share what you have. And it isn't a bad thing to see that in the parable. But parables have so much to them, there are often deeper layers to them. And this story has more to it than first meets the eye.

It has the man in purple. This detail about the color of a character's clothing isn't a fashion statement. In Roman culture, purple was the color of royalty, wealth, and position. It was so important, wearing purple was regulated by Roman law because how much purple a person wore indicated their status in the Roman system. This could mean the rich man wasn't just someone who could have given the character Lazarus some of his food, he might have had the ability to make changes in the laws and system that would have helped not just Lazarus but many more people. Besides the man in purple, this parable has the character Lazarus, who is the only character in all of Jesus' parables to have a name. This is not meant to confuse the character in this parable with the brother of Martha and Mary in John's Gospel. Instead, scholars tell us the reason for naming the character might be to indicate he is loved by God, because the name Lazarus means "he who God helps."

Jesus might be using this parable to challenge and contradict a common belief of the time that things like riches, status, sumptuous meals, and property were all forms of God's favor, and things like sickness, suffering, and poverty were signs of God's displeasure. One of the points of this parable might be that neither wealth nor poverty indicate a person's relationship with God, that is instead a matter of the heart.

There may be another layer to this parable. If the wealthy man's request to Abraham to have Lazarus communicate from beyond the grave with his brothers reminds you of the plot of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, you are in good company. According to scholars, there was a common story in Jesus' time about a rich man who dies only to suffer for his sins of selfishness and a poor man who dies and ends up in a place of refreshment. In the traditional story the rich man's request that the poor man be sent to give him refreshment and a warning to live a better life to his relatives is granted. But Jesus doesn't give what would have been the expected ending. He gives it the twist that the chasm that was created in life cannot be crossed after death by those who died. Perhaps to contradict the common assumption the poor are servants of the rich and challenge listeners of this parable to let go of such assumptions and prejudices.

Which might mean this parable isn't just about the rich and the poor and sharing what we have. It might be about those chasms that we human beings can create in life, like the ones Heidi Hall experienced, the chasms created by prejudice, fear, poor religious practices, anger, and hurt. These things often bring with them a type of death; death of relationship like Heidi saw, death of faith, death of community. Jesus' parable may be saying just as wealth and poverty might not be signs of God's favor or displeasure, death may not be the power that separates us from God or each other. That there is something that is stronger than death. Because there is, as Heidi's story illustrates so powerfully, resurrection life, which is not a ghostly appearance, it is a new type of life. It is the power of God's love, a power so great it can destroy even the separation of death.

Resurrection life is forgiveness, like the forgiveness Heidi gave to her mother. Resurrection life is healing, like Heidi found in her new church. Resurrection life is listening and waiting like the minister who met with Heidi practiced until she was ready to talk to him about the pain of her former church. Resurrection life is the connection Heidi felt to God when she suffered pain because of Christ's physical suffering and death.

Sometimes we can forget that when we were baptized, we were baptized not just into the Body of Christ, we were also baptized into both Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection. That means there is no chasm too great for God's Love to cross, nor for us when we live into the resurrection life of Jesus by forgiving, praying, participating in worship and ministry, and recognizing resurrection when we see it. Like Heidi Hall, a woman whose life is just one more expression of how God loves us so much, there is no distance too great for God to traverse for us, and it is this love that can help us bridge any chasm, because God's love is stronger than death.