

Great chasm

By [Stan Wilson](#)

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I spent most of the day after Hurricane Katrina checking on members, especially older ones, in and around Clinton, Mississippi, where I live. Clinton did not sustain serious damage, but we lost all power and lots of trees and roofs, and there was a palpable sense of fear and anxiety. Cars lined up immediately for gas, stores closed, evacuees packed the shelters, and the locals feared a serious shortage or crisis.

At the end of a long, hot and unnerving day, I was heading home to a cold shower when I received a call from my friend David in Nashville. He had one question: "Have you checked on the poor?" The thought hadn't occurred to me, so I turned my car around and drove back toward the hidden neighborhood where the poor mostly reside in our town.

In our town it's possible to go a long time without seeing the poor. A beautiful parkway lined with flags and flowers enables us to drive across town without driving through the neighborhoods leading to the poor. We do a pretty good job of keeping them hidden. My friend David must have been watching television coverage that we residents had not yet seen.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man is a tale of haunting distance and intimate nearness. The rich man is separated from Lazarus first by a gate and then, in Hades, by a great chasm, but across the chasm he sees Lazarus embraced in the bosom of Abraham. I long for such intimacy, but I don't know my neighbors very well, and they don't know me. The result is that we are increasingly fragmented from one another, and this fragmentation means I do not know the poor (and I can be increasingly unaccountable for the use of my wealth.)

On my trip back into town, I found a family I knew that had recently been evicted and were living in an uncle's shack. They were without any provisions, and all the

stores were closed, so I went to a family in our church. They cleaned out a cupboard of peanut butter, bread and bottled water. This was a brave gift, since they did not know when power and provisions would return.

It is ironic and tragic that I had to be reminded to remember the poor; I'm a pastor, after all. I have spent years studying the scriptures, and I like to think I know them pretty well. So, why did I forget the poor in a time of crisis?

The rich man thought he knew scripture too. He thought they were his stories; he possessed the stories enough to think himself a child of "Father Abraham," as he said. But he turns out tragically to have overlooked the heart and soul of scripture—the story of God's deep desire to create a people of hospitality and welcome for the poor and the stranger.

On my second effort to head home, I came across what looked like a party. I slowed down. Neighbors who had been helping one another all day were emptying the contents of their freezers into a great, shared, neighborhood cookout.

Across town most of the rich were frightened and sheltered, alone in their big houses, worrying about gas and groceries running out. But not here. Here was a neighborhood enduring the storm together and sharing its plenty.