

## Yes. ‘Just anybody’ can come!

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 21, Year C. September 30, 2007. (Text: Luke 16:19-31)*

A few weeks ago, Joan and I had dinner with a group of folks who regularly worship with us at this time each year and have invited the two of us often to share a meal with them before they go home. Every year when we get together, they have questions about our church, and the conversation a few weeks ago touched on our First Sunday Breakfasts. One of them had observed that at a First Sunday Breakfast they attended there appeared to be some homeless people who looked as if they had just come in off the street. Was that right? I said, “Yes, that’s right.”

The questioner then asked, “You mean just *anybody* can come?” I smiled and said, “Well, yes. ‘Just anybody *can* come!’” We all had a good chuckle, because the people in that little group of friends are believers who know that one of the main works of God in Christ is to bring people of all kinds together. “Just anybody can come” is one way of putting the mission of the Church into simple words.

It strikes me that there are two opposite movements at work in the world – on many different levels and in almost every nation, culture, and religion. If we wanted to use New Testament language, we could call these two opposite movements “spiritual powers” that are “at war with one another.” One power is of God and works to bring people together to seek broader forms of community, emphasizing a hope that human beings might some day come to share a common vision for life together on this planet – not denying our many differences, but emphasizing our many similarities, our essential connectedness and our hope for the future. The other power is “from the dark side,” and it’s exactly opposite: it pushes us towards increasing polarization, towards exclusion of those who are “different,” “alien,” “heretical,” or “unclean,” building walls between people and looking for a future where peace will come through a kind of global compartmentalization, sorting us out into homogeneous, separate units, each going about our lives without reference to the others – except that we might make a profit from trade with one another as long as we don’t let ourselves get contaminated by “Them.”

Maybe the world has always been like this. Maybe what I’m noticing is simply a pervasive, age-old phenomenon and nothing new. We certainly see a form of it in the pithy, pointed parable that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus. “*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.*”

People at the pinnacle of the ancient social order lived in a world of their own, in a bubble of privilege. But, outside the rich man’s house, outside his “gated community,” was a poor beggar. This beggar is the only character in one of Jesus’ parables who is given a proper name, *Lazarus*, which means “God is my help.” (Keep that meaning in mind, because the name tells us where this story is going!) Lazarus is not only poor, he’s also sick. His skin is covered with ulcers, and the dogs that have been eating the bread thrown under the rich man’s table come out and lick his pustulant sores. Lazarus is hungry, and he would have been happy to have some of the table scraps that went to the other man’s dogs.

Notice that we’re not told anything about the rich man’s “inner life” or his “true values.” We’re not told that he was evil. He was simply living the aristocratic life of wealth and comfort that he’d inherited. Neither do we learn anything about what people these days would call the “spirituality” of poor Lazarus. We do not hear that he was virtuous. We just have his name: “*God is my help.*” Perhaps that’s all we need.

Both men die, and their ultimate destinies continue to be as different as their earthly lives had been, but their fortunes are reversed. The rich man ends up in a place very much like hell, while poor Lazarus is taken by angels to be with Abraham, which is about as good as heaven can get. We get a little insight when the rich

man cries out to Abraham to “*send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.*” But Lazarus can’t be sent to help him, because – as Abraham says – “*Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.*” The social distance that was part of their earthly life has now been expressed as a spiritual reality in the life to come. Of course there has always been a “great chasm” between aristocrats and beggars, between those for whom God alone is their help and those whose real faith is in something else —like money, fame, or power; or like dogmatic purity, political correctness, and having the “right” friends.

But in the story each one knows that the other is there – just on the other side of the gate! The rich man even knows the beggar’s name. In fact he probably saw him every day as his slaves carried him up to the Temple in his sedan chair. Lazarus was always there, an unattractive part of the natural landscape of the rich man’s world, something to be accepted but otherwise ignored by an aristocrat whose interests were elsewhere. And Lazarus lay at the rich man’s gate, begging for alms from people whose religion taught them that to feed the hungry and help the needy were acts of true godliness.

At the end of Jesus’ story, the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers about the fate that’s waiting for them unless they change their lives. This brings us to what was really the main point of the parable. Abraham says, “*They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.*” The tormented rich man replies, “*Oh, no. But if someone rises from the dead, they will listen to him.*” Abraham knows better. If they won’t hear the truth that has been revealed in Moses and the prophets, they won’t pay attention even if someone rises from the dead. The message of Moses and the message of Christ have this in common.

The parable is a warning and a call to repentance, because *we* are the brothers (and sisters) of the rich man! We are those he wants Lazarus to warn: “*Repent, while you still have time!*” It’s not merely a matter of reminding us to give alms to the poor. And it doesn’t tell us that it’s evil to have great wealth, since Abraham himself was one of the richest men of his age. Besides, the rich man may well have pitched a coin to Lazarus from time to time. His guests, arriving and departing with retinues of slaves and flunkies, probably did the same. After all, no beggar sits forever at a spot where no one ever drops a dollar in his tin cup.

This story is a warning about the great chasm we’re tempted to put between ourselves and others. It’s a warning against the dark metaphysical power that’s at work in our world – and was at work in the world of the Bible, too – a power that pushes us to live in our own, private, exclusive, upholstered “boxes,” separate from any significant community with people who look radically *different* from us —whether because they’re poor, diseased, or mentally ill, or because they’re “aliens” of some kind, members of another race, heretics, adherents of another religion, or participants in what we delicately call “an alternative lifestyle.”

Eighty years ago, George Buttrick, one of the great preachers of the last century, said that Jesus’ parable offers no support to the assumption that the rich man would have fulfilled his spiritual duty if he had simply dressed Lazarus’ sores and fed his hunger. He wrote, “True charity is more than flinging coins to a beggar; it is not spasmodic or superficial. ...Food and medicine are necessary, but there *is a more fundamental neighborliness.*”<sup>1</sup> Christ commands his Church to offer the world “fundamental neighborliness,” a loving and compassionate connection with people of every type and condition, an openness to know and be known by those who – like Lazarus – are “at our gates.” Such a passion arises from hearts that have been shaped by the heart of the Master himself.

Through these doors, and to our altar, and into the fellowship of this Church – as well as to our First Sunday Breakfasts! – “*anybody can come.*”

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (© 1928), p. 143, quoted in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, *Luke-John* (©1995), p. 320.