

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on September 30th 2007 by the Reverend Dr. Richard P.
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Proper 21 Year C

Jeremiah 32: 1–3a, 6–15, Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16, 1 Timothy 6: 6–19,
Luke 16:19–31

“Playing God”

In that story you just heard about the rich man and the poor man covered with sores—it seems pretty clear that, at first glance, Jesus is expecting us to identify with the rich man. For one thing, if we do so, we will immediately feel guilty for our excess. We are supposed to recognize that thing in ourselves that keeps us from doing what we know we ought to do—which is to house and feed the poor. We might even listen to this story and recognize the haughtiness in ourselves that, like the rich man, who even after winding up burning in Hades, would try to treat the poor man, who by the way is now in heaven, like a servant.

But it also seems clear to me that Jesus means for us also to identify with Lazarus. Because most of us know what it is like to be somehow downtrodden, to be somehow out of sync with society, to be without some necessity of life, to be just different enough, that the rich people of the world ignore us totally. And if we identify with Lazarus, then we can easily feel self-righteous, secure in the knowledge that we are going to win.

And that idea—some might call it “conceit”—is the crux of this parable. Because once your train of thought gets that far you are about to derail yourself. The kingdom of God has no place in it for people who worship themselves. And we have to admit that conceit, is really idolatry, worshipping ourselves instead of worshipping or even honoring God. Voila, the chasm. In the story Abraham says “a great chasm has been fixed.” He means, unless you scour your heart and your soul, unless you give up the need to worship your own self, you simply cannot love one another in the way Jesus commands. And if you cannot love one another, you cannot see the kingdom of God, which is all around you. We all know this already. We know that the world we create is not the same as the world God has created. And we know that the world we create, in which

everyone is made in our image is, shall we say, less flexible—than the world God has created.

We have seen that in the church this week, of course. There is so much from this week's readings in this past week's happenings, that one has to wonder who is guiding whom here. The Anglican Communion, that scion of universal agreement—that bastion of sameness that has no problem with the New Zealand prayerbook; that bastion of uniformity that allows in the same mile and a half a St. Mark's full of incense and Latin chant and a Christ Church with no vestments—that group sent up a challenge to our own bishops to “make your church over in our image.”

Now, our church, the Episcopal Church, the province of Anglicanism in the United States—has for over two centuries been led by the power of the Holy Spirit. Nearly every time that happens trouble is the result. Abolition, prohibition, the ordination of women, and now, the full inclusion of all baptized—such radical positions we have taken in our church. Still, we are accused of insensitivity to our colleagues in other parts of the world.

So what have our bishops done? They have crafted a careful statement that says: –we cannot make rules for the whole church; – we agree that we said these things in 2006; and –we agree that we have some rules that everybody interprets. It is a masterpiece of Anglican thought. Because it says only what it says and nothing more. The reaction to the statement was wonderful. The earliest editions of the newspaper said “Episcopal Bishops Give In To Anglican Demands.” The next editions said “Episcopal Bishops Refute Anglican Demands.” What is going on here? I will tell you what is going on here. Everybody is playing God. And some of us are not listening to God.

Did you notice the story in the reading from Jeremiah? The gist of it is, that war has come to Jerusalem, and the few refugees who are left are holed up in a royal compound. Their relatives are trying to make money for their time in exile by selling off their family property. There is a rule that you offer your property to family before you put it on the open market. So the simple version of this story is, Jeremiah's cousin offers him the land, and Jeremiah buys it. Can you imagine explaining that to a mortgage company? “Well yes there is a battle going on on that field now, but I am sure it will be okay, God told me so.” Of course there is more to it. The interesting

thing is that God tells Jeremiah what is going to happen. Then God sends Jeremiah the sign. And Jeremiah, who knows God, even without the signs, recognizes what he is to do and buys the land as a prophetic act. A signal to all of God's people, a sign of the world to come.

This is what is happening now in our church. God has told us what to do. God has said that all of God's created people are the children of God. All of the children of God are heirs of God's kingdom. And there is no human on the earth who is fit to judge which children of God may be in the kingdom and which may not. That is God's job, not ours. Our job, is to build up the kingdom. Our job is to buy the land, and record our deed, and make the space available to every child of God. Our job is to build the kingdom, by realizing that the kingdom is already here. The kingdom of God, as Jesus liked to say, has drawn near.

Can you see it? You can, if you can put aside everything that distracts you from it. And that would be everything that keeps you from the true love of each other. I have said this before—the best way to find the kingdom is to look around you—look into the eyes of the person on your left and on your right and especially of the person whose eyes you do not want to meet—the Lazarus in your life, the one who is lying outside the door. Look into each others' eyes and you will see God's kingdom of love.

The point of parables is to make us think, to make us think hard, so hard we finally might learn something. The chasm is fixed only in the parable. Your heart is not fixed. Your soul is not fixed. You can see the kingdom, you can inherit the kingdom, you can have the true riches of the kingdom which are the honor and love of God. The letter to Timothy tells you how: keep Jesus' commandments, be generous, set your hopes on God. And take hold of the life that really is life. Amen.

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