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## *It's the Spiritual Economy Stupid*

**A Sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith**  
**Pentecost 21C**

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*In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.*

[Abraham said] "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16.31)

I gotta' tell ya, whenever I hear that punch line of today's parable I can't help it: my mind goes back to my old seminary professor telling a joke in class one day. He was trying to illustrate the point that people can fixate on certain views about God or religion and especially the Bible; so fixated we won't change our views no matter what we experience to the contrary.

He told us about a distinguished scholar who staked his entire career on the claim that the apostle Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians to the northern Galatians and not the southern Galatians. (You may not be "clued-in" at this level but it's a crucial point for determining the date of Paul's letter.) So at every conference the scholar attended on the subject he would repeat his theory and defend the argument with great passion and erudite scholarship.

Eventually of course he died and was delighted to find himself in heaven. And chief among his delights was the anticipation of meeting the apostle and having the chance to ask the author directly, "To whom did you write your Letter to the Galatians" to the northern Galatians or to the southern Galatians?"

Finally he meets the St. Paul himself and gets to pop the question. But as it happened the apostle's memory needs to be refreshed on the subject.

Hmm. Northern Galatians or southern Galatians, you say. Well, give me a moment, will you? Now where was I and what was I doing at the time? Let me think . . .

Meanwhile the scholar is chafing in agitation as he anticipates the crowning vindication of his career from the apostle's own mouth. At any minute he will hear St. Paul declare that his theory of northern Galatian readership is the correct one. He's nearly breathless as Paul finally responds,

Oh yes! Of course. It was the southern Galatians. Sure; I wrote that letter to the southern Galatians, not the northern Galatians. I remember it clearly now.

At which point the scholar leans forward just like at an academic conference and says, "But . . ."

Oh well. So much for scholarly objectivity! Now after hearing that joke I want you to imagine that from now on, into all eternity, that scholar will be trying to convince the apostle that he did not write his letter to the people he thinks he wrote it to. Rather the ascended scholar will keep insisting that Paul wrote it to the people the scholar thinks he wrote it to! In that way he will be turning his corner of heaven into an eternity of scholarly debate at academic conferences.

Now for some of us that would be an eternity of hell instead of heaven, right? But let's not presume! Maybe arguing your

point endlessly is what some of us really want to do in heaven. "'Different strokes for different folks,' they say. But really, we human beings are a "'piece of work,' aren't we!

Now it's that point about human nature that my seminary professor was really after. Whether or not Paul wrote his letter to the northern or the southern Galatians, the joke is about a deeper issue of misguided faith or false belief. The reason we laugh (if we laugh) is not because we're biblical scholars and realize how ridiculous it is to believe one thing rather than the other. The reason we laugh (if we laugh) is because we recognize our common human failing of holding onto our false beliefs no matter what.

No matter what, we're capable of defying reality if it is contrary to our fixed beliefs. Or to paraphrase today's gospel: sometimes it's true of us, too, that "'neither will we be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' Now I believe that this issue of "'being convinced'"the issue of faith or belief'"is where the Spirit wants to take us today. It's neither the issue of "'someone rising from the dead,' nor the issue of bad rich people deserving hellfire and damnation, but the issue of what we believe or disbelieve.

Yes, we hear a masterfully told parable alright. How vivid is the reversal of the poor man's fortunes. When he was alive he "'longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; [and] even the dogs would come and lick his sores.' (Luke 16.20-21)

And how compelling is the contrast: the contrast between the rich man's agony in flames on the one hand, and the poor man resting by Abraham's side; or resting, in the King James version that many of us grew up hearing, not just by Abraham's side but reclining in Abraham's "bosom." "'Rocka' my soul in the bosom of Abraham'"the phrase is now immortalized in that African American spiritual that also has roots in a European melody [cf. Pete Seeger interview accessed 9/25/2010 by this author at: [www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Music/2006/08/Pete-Seegers-Session.aspx?p=2](http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Music/2006/08/Pete-Seegers-Session.aspx?p=2)]

But what about the rich man in the parable, or what about rich people generally? More affirming and more generous is the treatment of wealth folks that we find in today's other New Testament reading, I Timothy.

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When we turn to the reading from Timothy we realize by contrast that the parable in Luke's gospel does not even mention God. The contrast is sharp because the reading from Timothy also includes a focus on rich people. But Timothy's approach to rich people directs them to anchor their wealth in their relationship with God, in order to determine where to find their true treasure.

That point is clearly stated in those final verses:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Timothy 6.17-19)

So here, rather than just avoiding the fires of hell Timothy exhorts rich people to "take hold of the life that really is life!" And notice this final connection among all of today's readings.

Notice that the phrase, "the life that really is life," also connects with our Collect appointed for today; our opening prayer where we prayed that we, running to obtain [God's] promises, may become partakers of [God's] heavenly treasure . . . ("Proper 21," The Book of Common Prayer (NY: Oxford, 1990 [1979]), p. 234)

Now "the life that really is life," combined with the pursuit of God's "heavenly treasure," leads us to that slogan about the economy that became popular in the 1990s. You may recall it was a key feature of President Bill Clinton's successful campaign for national office: "It's the economy, stupid." In that connection consider this variation:

It's the spiritual economy, get it?

It's not our earthly treasure, that is, that gets us "the life that really is life," but it's our heavenly treasure. The "uncertainty of riches," on the contrary, will garner for us the kind of sufferings that are spiritually equivalent to the torments of hell that we hear about in today's parable. Or in I Timothy's words (6.10): "In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

On this view the gospel is not about God punishing us eternally for our greed or abuse of riches, or for our neglect or exploitation of others. Rather when we practice those evils we garner for ourselves the spiritual equivalent of the parable's torments and sufferings. To make this more vivid let me tell another parable about spiritual economy, or about the spiritual dimension of economic disparity between rich and poor. This second parable is a contemporary one. It was preached here several years ago in this very pulpit by the Rt. Rev. James Jones, bishop of Liverpool, and he called it "An Inconvenient Analogy."

Imagine that somebody invites you for an-all-expenses paid cruise of a lifetime. You come to the Pier Head in Liverpool and your host says to you "Just a couple of conditions; this is all on me but you are never to ask where we are going or when we are going to get there." "Sounds fine by me," you say.

You board this ship and it's luxurious; you are shown to your suite on A deck and you cannot believe it. Within a few hours you are sailing in sunlight and you think "If there's a heaven, it must be like this!"

After six weeks of sailing around on the ship you think to yourself "I wonder where we're going" but, after all, you've made a promise and being a British "stiff upper lip!" you keep the question to yourself and you carry on enjoying yourself.

After six months you cannot hold the question any longer. You grab your host one day and say "Listen, I don't want to appear ungrateful but please, could you just tell me where are we going and when are we going to get there?" He says "Is there a problem? Is the suite not comfortable? Is the food not to your liking?" "No, no," you say. "It's all wonderful. I'm having the time of my life, but I just wondered where and when." He says dismissively, "Eat, drink, be merry." So you do your best.

After ten years cruising around on this wretched ocean liner the dream has become a nightmare. You scream at him, "Please, please tell me where and when!"

Ridiculous? No. We are on this planet like a ship cruising through space and every now and again the question pops into the mind of every single traveler at some stage, "Where and when?" These are questions of purpose and meaning.

Imagine you recover your composure and [slyly pose a different question] to your host: "Well, tell me, how many on this ship?" He says to you "Guess!" Well, you're not in the mood for guessing games but you say, "Two hundred?" "Wrong," he says, "A thousand!"

You say, "A thousand people?"

You're kidding me; it feels like only two hundred." "Yes," he says, "That is what it feels like to you because here on A deck there are only 200 people. But for the last ten years in the hold of this ship there have been 800 people and they are all on bread and water". [Accessed by this author on January 1, 2008 at [http://commonsblog.org/archives/2007\\_04.php](http://commonsblog.org/archives/2007_04.php)]

End of story. To repeat, Bishop Jones called this imaginary story, "An Inconvenient Analogy." But we could also call it, "The Parable of Unaware Torment" because it makes clear that our ignorance of other people's suffering is itself a form of suffering. Very cleverly, very cleverly indeed, the Bishop's parable uses a common experience as an analogy for understanding the spirituality of suffering that underlies our first parable. This is the experience we have all had of how unendurable it can be not to know something crucial. It's a perfect analogy for how unbearable it really is that there is a disparity between us and the rest of the world undergoing extreme poverty.

Every day, the parable implies, the world goes through another tormenting day of disparity between the poorest people and the rest of us. However since most of us here today are experiencing this disparity from our location up on "A deck," to use the analogy, we have a luxury or privilege that is really a covert form of ignorance and suffering. Yet our suffering may

become evident not as in today's first parable—not by waiting for some future afterlife of reversed fortunes where we will find ourselves on the wrong side of Abraham's chasm between heaven and hell.

Rather our suffering can become palpable just as soon as we start wondering, in this "ship of State" we're in, "Where are we going and when are we going to get there?" Where are we going and when are we going to get there? By daring to ask that question persistently and courageously we find ourselves, like the tourist in Bishop Jones' "Inconvenient Analogy," increasingly in solidarity with others less fortunate than ourselves who are also passengers with us, on this uncertain cruise.

And when that question, pursued courageously and persistently, becomes for us both a spiritual question and an economic one—but not one without the other—then we have arrived at the place to which our gospel has been transporting us today. Then the question, "Where are we going and when are we going to get there?" will have the gospel fulfillment of dissolving the illusion that we are not integrally related to everyone else on this spiritual and economic cruise.

Rich and poor and everyone in-between: we are implicated in each other's human experience and spiritual destiny. "It's the spiritual economy, get it?" And when we do "get it," it will be because we have decided to pursue that question with a gospel commitment. By the way, those of us who have taken that journey have discovered that neither guilt nor resentment is helpful. Rather a Gospel solidarity with all persons is key.

Where are we going and when are we going to get there? If the answer is a gospel answer it will include gospel mandates like the ones we have heard today: for example, from 1 Timothy there's the mandate that

those who are rich in the present age are not to be haughty, or setting their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment;

and the mandate of

doing good, in order to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share;

and mandate of

storing up for ourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that we may take hold of the life that really is life.

And finally there's the mandate from today's Collect, that

we, running to obtain God's promises, may become partakers of the heavenly treasure.

But let's not stop with here with biblical exhortations and mandates. More fortifying in the history of the church are prayers and hymns; poetry and song. And instead of that folk spiritual, "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham," let me leave you with the following social change or "movement" song that is one of my favorites [lyric sources appended below]:

Gonna' keep on moving forward,  
Keep on moving forward, keep on moving forward,  
Never turning back, never turning back.  
Gonna' build our house of shining threads,  
Build our house of shining threads, build our house of shining threads,  
Never turning back, never turning back.  
Gonna' teach our children justice,  
Teach our children justice, teach our children justice,  
Never turning back, never turning back.  
Gonna' treat all women as sisters,  
Treat all women as sisters, treat all women as sisters,  
Never turning back, never turning back.  
Gonna' love all men like brothers,  
Love all men like brothers, love all men like brothers,  
Never turning back, never turning back.  
Gonna' keep on moving forward,

Keep on moving forward, keep on moving forward . . .  
... and we're gonna' do all this through Our Lord Jesus Christ"

*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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Lyrics adapted from the social movement song by Pat Humphries, "Keep On Moving Forward" (1984). Cf. Author, history & origins: [www.fssgb.org/humph.html](http://www.fssgb.org/humph.html); Church & seder renditions: [www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2010/ga2010/165856.shtml](http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2010/ga2010/165856.shtml) and <http://advocacy.hias.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=10>; Lyrics: [www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Never\\_Turning\\_Back.htm](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Never_Turning_Back.htm) and <http://mysongbook.de/msb/songs/n/nevertur.html>; Lyrics, Listen, Buy: [www.emmasrevolution.com/listen/album/roots-rock-revolution/9-keep-moving-forward/](http://www.emmasrevolution.com/listen/album/roots-rock-revolution/9-keep-moving-forward/); Performance contexts & videos: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdMl6ZXd\]X4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdMl6ZXd]X4) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-ODPr-87H0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-ODPr-87H0)

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