
Rocka my Soul in the Bosom of Abraham

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Proper 21 – Year C**

*Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham,
O, rocka my soul.*

Like many of you, I am committed to the singing of African-American spirituals. Their rhythms and messages, sung from pain, and sung even from the mysterious joy that emerges from pain, caught me long ago as a child. I sing a lot of them. I am fascinated by their beauty and by their mystery.

What also fascinates me is how subversive they are.

Many of the old African-American spirituals were sung in opposition to the white man. And many of them were sung in opposition to the rich man. A lot of us white folks, and rich folks, don't like to admit this. We don't even recognize this.

In fact, a lot of us white folk and rich folk don't like to admit that we are well off, that we are privileged and rich. Our status is nuanced, of course. "Oh," I say, "yes I have some money, but—after all—I am nowhere near as well off as that person over there." Well, most of us here in this church, in this city, are pretty well off, compared to most other people in this world.

I say all this to admit the context of the gospel story we hear this morning. The story that Jesus presents us is about a rich man. Many of us, when we hear Jesus's stories, we want to immediately identify with the hero, the person who comes out blessed in Jesus's stories. But a lot of Jesus's stories do not favor the rich guy. I don't like to admit this, because—again—if one were to categorize most Americans today, I would fall into the rich category. And so would many of you! Whether you are black or white!

So, there was this rich guy, says Jesus, though Jesus never gives us his name. (His name would later be called Dives). Jesus, instead, gives the name of the other guy in the story, a sickly poor guy, covered with sores, hungry, named Lazarus. The rich guy, apparently, never paid much attention to Lazarus. They both die and Lazarus goes to rest in the bosom of Abraham. The rich guy ends up in a tormenting place that seems a lot like Hades.

But here's the thing. The parable is not about where one ends up. The parable is about who is listening to whom.

The rich guy says to Father Abraham, "Hey, send someone to help me—and—if not me, my brothers!" In fact, the rich man wants Abraham to send, not just anyone, but he wants Abraham to send Lazarus. Abraham responds, "They won't listen. They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them."

But the rich guy says, "But what if someone came back from the dead? They would listen to him!" Father Abraham claims that they would not even believe that guy, the guy who came back from the dead.

Now, we always seem to interpret this parable in a certain way. When it says they wouldn't even believe a man come back from the dead, we assume that they mean Jesus! Of course! It's Jesus! He's the one we claim back from the dead, right?

But, what if it is not Jesus whom this parable means? When it mentions someone coming back from the dead, what if it is not Jesus that this parable has in mind. In fact, the parable proposes someone else. The rich guy is asking, pleading, not that Jesus come back from the dead. The rich guy is pleading that Lazarus come back from the dead!

The parable wants Lazarus to come back from the dead and warn the other rich guys!

This is quite interesting to me, because, if you remember, the New Testament does mention another character who comes back from the dead. Not only Jesus, but another character comes back from the dead. Do you remember who it was?

It was someone named Lazarus!

It's too much to mention now, but I believe there is a curious possibility that the Lazarus who was raised from the dead, with his two sisters Mary and Martha, were all children of Simon the Leper. But, you will have to read the footnotes of this sermon for those details.[\[1\]](#)

In the story we have today, it is man named Lazarus who a rich guy wants to come back from the dead.

Rocka my Soul in the bosom of Abraham.
Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham.

The person singing this song, the admired character in today's parable, is someone who has spent his life covered with sores, but who dies and is resting the bosom of Abraham.

I think the song gets it right. The spiritual is identifying with the poor and the sickly, the outcast, Lazarus. African-American spirituals often take as their themes the plight of the oppressed and the poor in scripture. The old African-American spirituals do not immediately identify with the rich white guys in scripture (if there are any white guys); they identify with the poor and the outcast. Even the sick.

Listen to these spirituals; sing the African-American spirituals! And, by the way, please do not ever refer to *Kum Ba Yah* as a naïve little campfire song, ineffectual and oblivious. *Kum Ba Yah* is one of the most subversive of the old African-American spirituals. The historical roots of that spiritual have been traced to the 1920s, and found to have come from the Gullah shores of South Carolina and Georgia, from the black people who were crying and in pain. "*Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba Yah.*" "Kum Ba Yah," of course, means "Come by here." Someone's crying, Lord, please, come by here.

And that is the same thing that the rich guy is asking in today's parable. He wants the same person he was afraid to touch in life, afraid to listen to, he wants that poor guy to come touch him in Hades, to dip his finger in cool water and touch his tongue. If not, please have Lazarus return and speak. Let Lazarus return from the dead so that they will listen to him!

"But they don't listen," says Father Abraham. "They do not listen even if someone returns from the dead."

Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham.
Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham.

So, what are we supposed to do with this parable. What are we supposed to do, especially, if we are the rich guy?

Many people use this parable as a proof text, because it speaks of a chasm between the living and the dead that is so deep that no one can get over it. Some seek to "prove" (so to speak) that Hades, Hell, must be eternal the eternal with this parable. But that is not the point. That is not the point of the parable. The point of the parable is to listen to Lazarus while you can.

Listen to Lazarus when he is poor and sickly. Listen to the African-American spiritual!

*"So deep, you can't get under it,
So high, you can't get over it,
So wide, you can't get around it,
Oh rocka my soul."*

At that point, it's not the chasm that the spiritual is singing about. It's the grace of God. The African-American

spirituals lived in times when the chasm seemed too deep, too wide, too high. But, there is something deeper and wider and higher than that chasm, that chasm between rich and poor, between healthy and sick.

It's the grace of God that is deeper and wider and higher. The bosom of Abraham is that place where the love of God prevails. Sometimes it is the poor and the sick who realize the depth of grace, long before anyone else does.

That's the "door" that other versions of this spiritual sing about! The door is the grace of God. *"You gotta go in at the door."* Enter the grace of God.

The point is to listen to the poor guy now. Listen to the sick and hungry people now. Let Lazarus touch us today, not later. Listen to the guy singing "Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham" right now. The touch of the grace of God, so wide and deep and high that we can't get around or under or over it—the touch of the grace of God—is coming from the poor and unclean guy.

AMEN.

[1] I know that I am mixing gospel stories here, but I propose a possibility. I suggest that the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead, with his two sisters according to the Gospel of John, could have all been the children of Simon of Leper.

Here is how it goes: Mark 14.3 says that while Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of someone named Simon the Leper, a woman came up with an alabaster jar to anoint him. John 12 says that Jesus went to the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead, where they had a dinner for him, and that Martha served, that Lazarus, was there, and that Mary took pure nard, and anointed Jesus's feet, and then wiped his feet with her hair.

Yes, the Gospel of Mark is not the same as the Gospel of John; but if the gospels are referencing the same event, I think Lazarus was the son of a leper. If so, he was considered as unclean as his father. It is this Lazarus that Jesus touched, that Jesus raised from the dead.