

## DIVES AND LAZARUS—BRIDGING GAPS

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Sept. 30, 2007

Jesus tells a dramatic parable about a beggar, Lazarus, who is named in the story, and a rich man, who is not named. Later writers applied a name, Dives, which is what he has been called through the centuries. Dives and Lazarus lived next to each other, but as if in different worlds; and when they died, there was still a great, permanent chasm between them.

Recently, Dives has taken up reading the New York Times. This is to try to distract himself from his persistent thirst. He noted last month that the census bureau was reporting that New York City was the place where the gap between rich and poor was the widest in the whole country. The top 20% of wage-earners made 20 times the average of the lowest 20% “Ah,” he said to himself, “so this New York sounds as if it might be my kind of place.”

Several days later, he read a comment by Warren Buffet, the widely admired investor from Omaha, Nebraska, who said that while his own income was taxed at 18 per cent, his receptionist was taxed at 30 per cent. Dives was struck with respectful awe: “This country not only has a gap between rich and poor, but its rules work to make the gap ever wider.”

Then Dives discovered the Times’ worshipful series called “The Age of Riches,” and his blood began to boil. [I was going to say, “He got hot under the collar.”] His sin, he began to believe, was not in ignoring Lazarus, but in being born at the wrong time and the wrong place. If he lived in New York now, he would be a magnet of admiration and interest. Reporters and photographers would have waited at his door to gather crumbs of wisdom for the “Age of Riches” series.

If his investments grew too risky, the government would have pumped money into the banking system to protect his hedge funds and his leveraged buyouts. His parties, quite popular in his own time, would have been on something called “Page Six.” He would even have been able to run for public office, with no more qualification than his wealth. And get elected!

“Born at the wrong time,” he mused bitterly. But in spite of his righteous anger, there was still that great gulf, the one that got him into trouble in the parable told by Jesus.

Perhaps Dives’ sin lay not in his wealth alone. Some part of his moral crime was in failing to recognize the God-given humanity of Lazarus when he lay at Dives’ door. (And even later, when he saw him afar off in the bosom of Abraham, Dives

only saw Lazarus, at most, as a gofer who might be able to run one errand or another for him.) Even in the presence of Abraham himself, there was an unbridgeable gulf between him and Lazarus.

Jesus took this kind of gap very seriously. If wealthy people came to him and offered to join his ministry, he nearly always asked them to give away all that they had, and then they could come. He said that the rich couldn't join him in the Kingdom, because, he said, "they already have their reward."

If we want to follow Jesus, we also need to take the challenge of wealth seriously. We have to resist the tide of our society, which is going increasingly gaga over wealth and wealthy people. Conservative economists rant about the "moral hazard" of letting people with bad mortgages off the hook, fearing they will be confirmed in their spendthrift ways. But from a Christian point of view, the investors whom the Federal Reserve bailed out are at a "moral hazard" because of their wealth. And we are at a moral hazard because even though our wealth is much more modest, there is a gap between us and the poor, too.

Lazarus is at our doorstep. How shall we respond to him?

The challenge to us is somewhat different than the one that arose for citizens of earlier societies. They faced only individual or family questions about how to respond to the poor people they met face to face. They had few opportunities to challenge the class divisions and rules of their societies that kept poor people in their places.

We, on the other hand, as citizens in a democracy, take part in setting the rules that govern the conditions that keep poor people in their places. Such power is something that our forebears could not have imagined. If our government proposes tax cuts that favor the wealthy, we as Christians have to look very skeptically at these ideas. And when the government proposes cuts in health care, we have a responsibility to see how these cuts impact poor people. The dangers of having too much wealth and the moral challenge of complacency when others have too little are factors that we must pay attention to.

Poverty is not just an abstraction. Three days ago the City controller issued a report that said that life expectancy for those who live in the poorest neighborhoods in New York is eight years shorter than for people who live in the wealthiest neighborhoods. People who are poor have more illnesses, have worse health care, have inferior educations, have higher infant mortality rates, and so forth.

Much of our thinking about poverty and wealth needs to move beyond charity toward changing the rules to be more equitable. We should be joining with others

to challenge that which keeps Lazarus and his brothers and sisters at a disadvantage.

There are lots of different kinds of barriers that keep poor people in that condition. Some are about money, and some are about services; some are about discrimination. Last year, a few of you had a hand in overcoming one of these barriers. Let me tell you the story: two years ago, our church sponsored a public program on alternatives to incarceration. One of the groups represented that night was RIPPDP, Rights for Imprisoned People with a Psychiatric Disability. It's a self-help group, made up of people with a history of both mental illness and of being put in prison or jail, and their families. Their aim that night was to make us aware of a campaign they were waging called, "Boot the SHU." SHU in this case means Special Housing Unit, which is Orwellspeak for solitary confinement. People with a mental illness in state prisons were not receiving consistent treatment for their condition. This often led them to respond badly to orders from the guards. The standard response to this type of behavior was to be sent to solitary for months. I don't know if you can imagine what this sort of isolation did to people with a mental illness. Some committed suicide, for starters. It was agony for all. Marj noted that some of the people would not even have been in prison at all, if it were not for their mental illnesses.

So RIPPDP and some of its allies were working to Boot the SHU, the "Special Housing Unit," and they made great progress. About a year after our meeting, their proposal was passed by both houses of the Legislature, and last summer it lay on the governor's desk. We on the Mission Committee asked you to contact the governor about this, and some of you did. But the governor vetoed the bill on the last day before it would have automatically become law.

This year, the story began in the same way; the law passed both houses of the Legislature, and went to the Governor's desk. And this time, because the support was so widespread, there was no need to make phone calls. The bill was signed. It provides mental health training for guards, and mental health treatment for prisoners. And the end to solitary confinement for these prisoners.

We have continued to develop our relationship with RIPPDP, without which we would not have known about this extremely unfair system. Your efforts helped to correct one of the systematic cruelties of an important public system.

Lazarus is at our doorstep. How shall we build bridges over the gaps that yawn between us and him?

Bridging gaps is a fundamental habit with our church. We started out one hundred and seventy-some years ago being dedicated to the abolition of slavery. When

Charles Finney was building his marvelous Tabernacle, a pro-slavery mob burned it down. When William Thompson brought African-American preachers into the pulpit before the Civil War, passions ran so strong that someone fired a gun at him when he was in the pulpit.

When the church addressed the gap between slave and free, between white and black, doing so created or widened some gaps between us and those who opposed what we were doing. Perhaps it is an unfortunate fact that when we try to bridge one gap, if it's a big one, we will at least temporarily widen others.

So in this era, our church—and our denomination--have adopted a goal of bridging the gap between gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons and the mainstream Christian tradition. With substantial gay leadership and a gay pastor, this church has placed itself just a little bit further ahead in what we imagine is the historical march toward acceptance of gay members as being fully included in the Christian fellowship, and progress toward gay rights in general.

Last week Pastor James told us of our church being attacked in Wikipedia. I am sure that more such difficulties will arise. Because what we and our denomination are doing, which feels celebratory and wholly appropriate and Spirit-led from our perspective, is actually opposed to the official positions of most Christian denominations. Some Christians really hate us for doing what we are doing, and wish us ill. We need to be prepared for what will seem to us as surprising, unfair hostility.

We need to remember that Jesus said, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” (Luke 6.26) We need to be ready to give an account of why we what we are doing is the right thing to be doing at this time in history. We need to be prepared to explain why we are not false prophets, but faithful ones.

Lazarus is within our doors. What shall we do with him?

Lazarus is not only outside on the steps, but he and his brothers and sisters are inside here with us. Within our fellowship, we are all poor, in one way or another, at one time or another. Traditionally, when we are in church, we put the best face on a situation, and think it is our duty to pretend to be comfortable. Church relationships can be superficial.

About twelve years ago, at a church retreat, we determined that we should take advantage of our small size and use the opportunity to get to know each other better. A small committee, consisting, as I remember it, of Dick Adams, Tina DeVaron, Bonnie Rosborough and myself—I hope I included everyone who was

involved—met to plan what became our custom of after-church dinners. So the Sunday evening dinner, which you may think of as just a convenience, or a place to meet friends, is actually intended to allow us to go beyond the superficial exchanges common at coffee hours, and to begin to know each others' hopes and concerns.

If we can use these dinner conversations to really listen to each other, and to support one another; then we can overcome the gaps between us. I suppose one way to approach it would be to take the casual question, "How are you?" and to answer it truthfully, for a change.

As a listener, you might, looking back, say to me, "Wow, you talked about a lot of different things: Jesus' attitude toward wealth, our responsibility as citizens to make society more equitable, our church's embodiment of bridging the gap between the gay community and Christian religious tradition, and how we spend our time at dinner. Is there any unifying theme?"

Well, it's all about gaps between people on a societal level and a personal level, and where we are or where we should be in addressing them.

May the courage and embodied love of Jesus inspire and empower us to address these matters. In his name I pray, Amen.