



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

*By Peter Schuller*  
*Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

A very good morning to you, and let me say what a great pleasure it is be here, sharing some thoughts about God's Mission at Trinity and our collective spiritual journey as Episcopalians.

When Sharon started talking several weeks ago about the possibility of our hosting a Syrian refugee family, it struck more than one responsive chord in me. As many of you know, when I was 7, our family moved to Beirut, Lebanon, where I spent many wonderful years, learning about different cultures, meeting all sorts of Arab people—including Syrians—and walking among the Palestinian refugees, who had been exiled from their homes in Israel. The troubling images of their refugee camps are permanently etched in my memory.

But I was also reminded of an earlier time, in 1957, when my parents welcomed into our house a family of Hungarian refugees, who were fleeing their homeland, following the crushing Soviet defeat of the 1956 Hungarian revolt. Even though I was barely 5 years old, it made a big impression on me, primarily because of how grateful that family was for the comfort of an American home while they tried to get resituated.



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Several years later, when I started to become fascinated with metaphysics—especially the big “why” questions—I thought about both the Palestinian and Hungarian refugees and why it was that some people face such great trial in life, while others seem to live in excessive wealth and privilege. Then I encountered this famous enigma in today’s gospel and remember specifically asking my father what Jesus meant when he said that “many who are first will be last and the last will be first”.

My father was a somewhat complicated fellow, a compassionate liberal and a VERY competitive athlete who always aspired to finish first, so I am not sure he really knew how to answer that question. I certainly don’t remember receiving a particularly compelling response, so I have pondered the question many times since. Eventually, I implicitly understood that the answer must have something to do with self-sacrifice and dying to self. But the saga of Job and Jesus’ response to the young rich man in our Gospel reading tell me that there is more to the story.

For context, I should tell you that I am a cradle Episcopalian who has always loved that our Church cares deeply about the welfare of others, embraces diversity, and aspires to respect the dignity of every human being. Moreover, as a young man, I was inspired to become a contrarian thinker by my maternal grandfather, Bishop William Appleton Lawrence. Being a contrarian means that I embrace change and am comfortable going against the grain. Before he became Bishop of Western Massachusetts, my grandfather had chosen the unpopular but courageous path of being a Conscientious Objector during World War II. To me, he epitomized what it meant to be an Episcopalian, and it gave me the impetus to become someone who has always been interested in asking the hard questions.

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Today's lessons do raise some hard questions. They are also a contrarian's dream, and they provide us with the perfect opportunity to talk about both the great strengths of our church community and its most enduring challenge, as we seek to fulfill God's Mission in the world. Having become a systems scientist over the last 10 years of my career, I am going to use a little science to explain what I mean.

First of all, what Jesus' Two Great Commandments are to Christians, the Laws of Thermodynamics are to a systems scientist. And just as the Second Great Commandment addresses the ordering of our relationship to each other, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics deals with the dynamics of order in systems. Specifically, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law states that systems tend to move toward greater entropy—essentially this means that they seek out their most natural and probable states. There are lots of different kinds of systems in the world, but for today let's just think about the systems dynamics of organizations, like the Church.

Many people are confused by entropy, so I want to give you a simple example to illustrate the concept. If you tossed a box of different marbles on the floor, they would of course scatter all over the place, which would be their most natural, disordered state. They would therefore be considered in a state of maximum entropy.

Now, in order for a system like an organization to avoid the disordering influences of entropy, something that systems scientists call "Work" must be introduced into the system, in the form of energy and information. Going back to our simple example of the marbles, if you sorted all of them into different piles, according to size, color, or design, your energy would provide the Work required to generate some form of order, thereby reducing the overall level of entropy.

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**And as a church community, that is exactly what we come together to do—provide the energy that staves off entropy!** Left to its own devices, the early church would eventually have dissolved into the disorganized pursuit of individual theologies, interests, and personal agendas. It is no different in the Church today, which means that we are called to engage in the Work that is critical to sustaining the organizational integrity of the whole system—in other words, all of God’s Kingdom. The Work of God’s mission, the Work of our mutual respect and concern for each other, the Work of generous, helping hands to serve the community around us—all of that invested energy insures that we will sustain the organizational system of Trinity—and the Church at large—even as we embrace some of the entropy that Episcopal theology allows for.

As our Rector keeps reminding us, we also generate order and organizational cohesion when we practice a defined liturgy and celebrate communion. When Jesus left the disciples with the gift of the Last Supper, I think it was because he understood the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics and how critical it would be to hold together the ordered center in the face of the entropy, disorder, and potential chaos that would likely follow his death. And I also think this is precisely the message that Jesus meant to deliver in the Gospel reading this morning, one which clearly was difficult for the rich man, and Peter, to grasp.

Both the young rich man and Peter wanted a prescription from Jesus that would assure their own individual salvation in God’s promised Kingdom. But Jesus tells them that the Work required to sustain God’s Mission, in community, involves more than personal self-sacrifice. Selling off all of one’s possessions and

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giving the proceeds to the poor is not simply mandated by Jesus as an exercise in gaining self-awareness and grasping the true nature of God's Kingdom. It is also Jesus' description of divine social order, borne of a collective consciousness that today might be captured in the socialist principle, "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs". In other words, the church, as community, is not about the cumulative efforts of individuals but the **co-creative efforts of the whole—it is not about who is first or last but what happens to the entire community**. It is not about the salvation of the one but the well-being of all Creation. If that makes Episcopalians "Socialists", so be it. We've probably been called worse.

Once we use some science to understand the "how" of church organizational development and square it with the theology Jesus delivers in our Gospel reading, we see more clearly the "both/add" benefits of our Episcopalian approach to community. We can celebrate and embrace diversity while at the same time remaining focused on the collective Work we must undertake to sustain the church as an organization. This Work that we do together goes well beyond simply being God's hands and feet in the world. ***We are created in the Image of God, designed to serve as the very reason for Creation.*** God's Creation is purposely balanced between the dynamics of chaos and order, **precisely** so that we might be *creative* agents of God's mission, helping to direct the way life unfolds here on earth. Not only does the Work we generate in Christian community help mitigate the disorder embedded in our social systems, but it also tips the scales toward a form of order that exemplifies fairness, generosity, compassion, and respect for the dignity of all Creation.

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Interestingly, I think this is also exactly what saves Job. Because we are willing to invest the co-creative energy that generates justice and love, we inherit God's most precious gift of all—the power of free will, the ability to choose. Eventually, this is exactly what Job comes to understand. Not just in today's lesson but throughout the entire Book, we find a Job who alternates between self-pity, despair, and anger on one hand, and righteousness on the other. But he triumphs in the end by choosing to see God as Creator and therefore Wiser than we might ever hope to be. He chooses to trust God and eventually is rewarded for it, but that's not the point. The point is that he chooses to adopt the most optimistic and life-giving view of God, regardless of how baffled he is by his current circumstances. In other words, he chooses to have faith, and that faith is the Work that ultimately staves off the potentially disordering effect of all the mental and physical trials that have been heaped upon him.

There is much at stake here, and it involves far more than just the organizational integrity of our Trinity community. In their recently published book entitled *The State of the American Mind*, Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow describe the evolution of post-modernism in American culture, which they claim has had the effect of dismantling any lingering sense of the unity that had been introduced into our national culture with the Declaration of Independence. And I quote:





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“By 1985, people pretty much stopped talking in terms of a common, unitary American anything. It wasn’t only that the American Mind had slipped into ignorance and hedonism. It was that recourse to any essential and proper feature of American individuals now came off as empty, and in some settings suspect... We cherished the *pluribus* and abandoned the *unum*. The American Mind was one of the casualties.”

That American Mind is what drives many of the disordering influences within our national socio-cultural system. The highly individualistic focus embedded in American culture doubles down on the natural forces of entropy and tears at the fabric of God’s church. But now we know how to deal with that reality. Now we know that Work in community, which has so many wonderful expressions here at Trinity, will categorically stave off the effects of entropy and secure the integrity of our church.

In the face of overwhelming adversity, Job chose to believe in God and have faith in the future, even as he struggled to understand his current predicament. Jesus offered the rich man a difficult choice, which apparently overwhelmed him, but we cannot assume that he never changed his priorities at some later date. That is the genius of God’s Creation, the wonder of our human existence—our free will knows no bounds. If we choose to trust and generate the energy that powers community, we are assured that God’s Creation will prevail. The Bible tells us so, and so does our science!

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