

Invited To Jesus

*Bible Reading:
Matthew 11:25-30*

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Sietze Buning, story teller of our faith community, tells the story of a man whose life was beat up, who was tired, who carried a heavy burden on his shoulders and in his heart.

His name was Benny Ploegster.

Benny was a drunk.

For three years the church elders had tried to change Benny's ways. And for three years they'd failed. Benny failed. Benny remained a drunk. The stain on his life remained as deep as ever. The siren song of booze kept seducing him. The chains seemed to hold fast.

And so - the elders decided it was time to excommunicate Benny. No other option. Three years and nothing to show for it. They were done.

Benny, writes Buning, could have reacted in several different ways to his excommunication.

He might have resigned his membership and just walked away from a group that he could very easily have labelled "a bunch of hypocrites."

He could have done that.

He could have gone to a more lenient church.

He could even have continued to attend this same church, and just skipped the excommunication service -

lots of dark, shadowy corners in the balcony area where no one would see him, and from where he could escape after service without speaking to a soul.

He could have done any one of these things.

But he didn't.

Benny went to church on the day he was excommunicated.

Benny sat in the centre, a few rows from the front.

Benny stood,

he stood right up,

head bowed,

when the form for Excommunication was read.

Buning writes - *"Why shouldn't Benny stand up? That in twenty centuries there was not a single precedent for bodily presence of an excommunicant at his excommunication is insufficient reason not to."*

So, Benny stood.
His father cried.
And Benny was excommunicated.

The elders didn't know what to make of it,
what to do with Benny.
Others in the congregation - they didn't know, either.

Benny didn't fit the bill. There wasn't a category around that could properly cover him or his situation. They didn't know what to do with all this.
And so Benny was dropped.
Yet, desperate for mercy, desperate for Jesus, Benny kept coming to church until he died of cirrhosis of the liver.

The Church had no room for Benny.
One wonders, though, what the Lord thought.
If He had room for a skid-row drop-out?
If there would be room in heaven for a tired sinner desperate for mercy?
If there could be eternal rest for someone hounded by life-long addiction?

And as we wonder about that, something inside us knows, doesn't it?
That somehow, beside the criminal on the cross, and joining in the chorus,
"Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom" (Lk 23:42)
somewhere there is Benny.
with an eternally easy yoke and heavenly lightened burden.
A strange-looking child of God who saw the Son and refused to leave Him.
Who through the blurred vision of addiction realized that God-life would only be found by Jesus – and refused to quit.

Because Heaven's categories are shaped quite differently than those we fashion with human minds and hearts.
Heaven's categories are cross shaped.

We people - ah, how many different boxes we construct;
how many categories we fashion
into which we try to cram all the stuff, events, and relationships of life.
They are boxes that, in many cases, are shaped by our gender or our social background or our ethnic heritage or our educational experience or our age.

They are boxes that we have trouble seeing out of. And when people come along who don't fit into those boxes, we're really not sure what to do with them.

So sometimes we do nothing.

Sometimes we ignore.

Sometimes we condemn.

Sometimes we push them away.

Sometimes we try to force them into our box.

How many Benny's don't you know?

Their situation was too hurt-filled, too unpredictable, too slow to respond, too stained for us to be able to deal with.

And somehow, somehow they ended spinning, or getting spun, to the outside of the circle.

Gone.

Now, Benny's story was one of the sin, sickness and lifestyle pains that go with chemical addiction.

But his story is only one of many, many stories of people that found themselves spun to the edge, or pushed out and off because they didn't fit into the various boxes and categories that we nest together in this organization and institution that we call "Church."

Which is understandable.

Because "Church" is made up of people.

And as we people begin to relate and group and gather, we do so around things we have in common.

They join us with each other.

They remind us how we are *like* each other.

They keep us together.

That's how groups form. And then when people come along who don't have that common link, who don't fit into our common box.....

..... well, the results are predictable.

Painful! But predictable.

Because their skin colour is different, we'd rather not have them over for coffee.

How could we spend the evening with them - they're from such a different part of society, if you know what I mean?

The years between us and them - we'd never understand each other, anyway. But she's a *woman*....

He was raised in Ireland, and you were raised in.....

And the gaps begin, or grow.

Even in the Church.

Leaving people sometimes miles apart from each other.

It's just kind of natural.

It's the very typical human dynamic.....

..... hear now the heavenly, holy Word of God:

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev 7:9-10)

The heavenly dynamic speaks of one multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-talented, multi-aged, multi-dimensional Church.

One.

Sort of like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle:

each piece unique

each one linked to the next one

together forming one, whole picture; a picture.....

- with maybe, even, a piece that looks like Benny.

Where we are busy constructing worldly realities with many different boxes that keep some folks in, and other people out;

where we quickly and conveniently fashion labels that we slap, gossip-quick, on other peoples' back,

the scriptures speak of one label, and one label only that is slapped on the human race.

It is the label of sinner.

Whether you are eight or eighty.

Whether you were raised in Hong Kong or Hamilton.

Whether you earn \$100,000/year or struggle by on Mother's Allowance.

Whether you sit on skid row or cruise the side streets of suburbia.

All - says the Scriptures - "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" (Rom 3:23)

And to all comes the invitation of Jesus - "*come to me.*"

Even to Benny, trapped in his booze.

To those who come, another label is applied.

It is the label, "*Forgiven - Royal Child Of God; Citizen Of Heaven*"

That same label -- for all who come.

Sometimes we can see the label clearly.

Sometimes the latent effects of sin, and the pains of a world still burdened and waiting for Christ's return – sometimes these things obscure that label.

But it remains there.

For all who hear and respond to the invitation of Christ -

"Come to me....."

That's the one box, the one standard of Heaven -

The standard of the cross.

The standard of Jesus.

And the sinner, head bowed,
desperate before Him.

The Church is full of sinners like that. Sometimes we forget that, but it is so.

Sometimes our minds begin to play games and grade folks into various grades and sub-categories of Christian; and we find ourselves only hanging around with certain grades or certain categories.

And then we bump back into Revelation 7, with the heavenly vision of **one** gathering.

It is *All Nations* heritage Sunday.

A reminder that wherever we're from, and whatever our background, when we come to Jesus we belong. Period.

Which brings us to the Communion Table.

Where we'll gather to share from many grapes squeezed into one juice.
And many grains of bread ground into one loaf.
Before one cross.
As one Church.

For some of us this will be a time to remember that, yes, it's true, we **do** belong.
Others may reject us.
Our habits and dress and reputation may try to marginalise us.
But Jesus says, "*Come to me.*"

For others of us this will have to be a time of confession.
For we've been busy building boxes and slapping on labels.
There are people we have just quietly grown to ignore.
There are some that we have even put down, shunned, ridiculed.
We have sinned.
And the one cross of Jesus calls us to repent.

And - for some of us - it will be a call to action.

For we see the vision of One Church, One Body of believers, and something is resonating inside. The Lord is stirring us to action - to actively work towards including others we may simply have walked past, or not talked to as we headed to our cars to leave after church;

folks that we just never thought about inviting when we hosted a gathering in our home;

ones that we assumed wouldn't fit when we looked for folks to assist in a project or function.

After all – we're going to share the same heaven.
Wouldn't it stand to reason that we learn to begin to live together, work together here on earth?

We share the same Saviour.

Wouldn't it stand to reason that we learn to come in honesty

- no game playing -

that we learn to honestly come as one, unified gathering of people to the celebration of Communion?

"Come to me."

“Yes, Lord, we’re coming..... All of us..... we’re coming.”