

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 26th. Sunday -C-
Amos 6: 1, 4-7 Psalm 146 I Timothy 6: 11-16 Luke 16: 19-31
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If we haven't gotten the message already about possessions and wealth in these Sunday gospel passages, today we have one more parable in which Luke continues to make his point. This gospel keeps coming back to the theme of possessions and their use. From the beginning of Luke and throughout the gospel, the poor have a special place. Just a few reminders: they are the chosen recipients of the good news (4: 17-19) from the inception of Jesus' ministry; Jesus preaches to the poor and also remembers them in his parables and illustrations; his own beginnings were humble and when he is presented in the temple his parents give the offering of the poor for the sacrifice (2:24).

Even though Luke returns to the theme of possessions and wealth frequently in his gospel, he never really gives us a clear prescription of what exactly we are to do with them. Some, like Jesus' disciples, must leave all behind to follow Jesus. Yet it is clear that Mary, Martha and Lazarus didn't, since they had a house in which they offered hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. Zacchaeus, the reformed chief tax collector, is lauded for giving half of his possessions to the poor. He didn't have to give all. With thoughtful consideration, each of us will have to make up our own mind how we respond. Certainly, this gospel will not leave us complacent about our possessions or our wealth. They can be used to help the poor—or they will be a stumbling block in our following Christ. There isn't much wiggle room, no in-between comfort zone, for those to whom parables, like today's, are addressed.

Remember last week's parable of the steward who discounted the debts he owed his master? He was commended for using material goods to make friends. In that parable possessions are called “dishonest wealth”—possessions are suspect in Luke's gospel. Whatever we have, we had better use it wisely. It's not that we have possessions, it's what we do with them, that determines our standing as a disciple. Let's look more closely at this dramatic parable.

The rich man is really rich. His clothes set him apart. Imagine how he would stand out wearing purple and fine linen in the desperately poor world that surrounded him. He also eats very well. In fact, his daily food is “sumptuous.” In the world of the vast majority of his contemporaries, starvation was a reality they faced daily or from harvest to harvest. But what about our world? Maybe we don't fit under the rubric of eating “sumptuously” every day. Who has time or money for such extravagance? I guess it depends on your perspective. I was walking down the

aisles of our local supermarket with a friend who, the day before, had returned from living ten years with the poor in Central America. He was still in shock at the general opulence of our ordinary supermarket. I had to describe to him what some of the foods were. Special drinking water from Vermont, costing \$1.25 for a small bottle, confused him. “Wasn’t our drinking water safe in Raleigh?” he wondered. The pet food aisle really set him back on his heels. As he examined the labels of the cans of “choice meats” for dogs, he sighed, “The poor people I knew would love to eat what we feed to our animals.” Yes, it depends on your perspective. His observation reminded me of this parable of the beggar at the door of the rich man. (Some translations suggest it is a “gate,” implying a very wealthy home, a mansion.) Lazarus “would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table.” Would Lazarus have to fight off the dogs who licked his sores for those scraps?

Most of us probably don’t consider ourselves wealthy. We eat rushed meals grabbed at fast food restaurants or a quick coffee and bagel on our way to work. Hardly sumptuous dining. But it depends on one’s perspective. To the poor of third world countries, even what we consider ordinary daily fare, would seem sumptuous. Then there’s the waste of food in restaurants and school cafeterias, etc. None of us well-ensconced in the first world can dismiss this parable as applying only to a select few. Our response to the parable may begin by the general sense of discomfit we feel on hearing it. It shakes the ground on which we think we securely stand.

Have you notice that the rich man is not named? That’s not unusual in Jesus’ parables, whose main characters are just called, “a sinner,” “a Sower,” “a woman,” “a merchant of fine pearls,” “a master” “a servant,” etc. In this parable something unique happens—a character is given a name. It’s as if a spotlight has been shone on his little patch of earth by the rich man’s door. Here lies Lazarus—and note he is lying, not sitting. His condition is dire. The one who in his lifetime is ignored, not worth a second glance (except by the dogs who lick his sores—what a touch, dogs had more pity on him than the human in the story), is the one who is named, singled out, given center stage. Doesn’t that show us again where Jesus’ heart lies and who is important in his book of dignitaries?

Lazarus is his name. For many of us much of our lives is lived apart from the truly poor. They are just statistics-- nameless and countless. They are a sea of faces we see on television or drive by in certain sections of our cities. But this story isn’t about a sea of poor unnamed people, it’s about one beggar lying outside a rich man’s house. In naming him, giving him an identity, Jesus is encouraging us to see the individual poor person closest to us, perhaps one whose name we already know, and to respond in some way to that person. I think Jesus knows he is also loading the deck. Once we get close enough to know more about even one person’s needs, we begin to see there are others in the same condition. Who knows where such knowledge

might lead us and what responses we might make? The parable may no longer be about just one poor person after all!

Is it possible that our possessions, which many call a “blessing from God,” may indeed be what blinds us and keeps us distant from God? Do we pursue them with an intensity that throws our priorities out of whack? Are we missing the needs of those closest to us—those in our very family, at our workplace—those whose names we already know? Are we missing the obvious? The rich man is rudely awakened to his isolation when he finds himself eternally cut off from Lazarus and God’s other blessed ones. He learns that the possessions he may have counted as a sign of God’s favor in his life time, had really blinded him from seeing who and what were truly important.

But Lazarus’ miserable condition wasn’t the blessing. Rather, it was that God noticed Lazarus and loved him. If Lazarus judged his status before God based on what he had, he would have had no tangible sign of God’s favor. But the parable shows us that, despite what seemed to be a cursed existence, he was indeed favored in the eye of God. If I were preaching to a poor congregation, I would not suggest that they be satisfied in their condition hoping just for a next-life reward. But as they struggle to live and be a community of support for each other, the parable seeks to dispel their fear that God is deaf to them. The world may be deaf and blind to them, but God isn’t. And since God has taken notice, those of us who can do something to help them, should do the same. God notices the poor Lazarus, and God notices the one who ignored him. For sure God will notice the ones who help by a wise use of their possessions.

The second part of the parable makes a shift. The rich man invokes Abraham, begging him to have Lazarus dip his finger in water and bring it to him to cool his tongue. This rich man must still think of Lazarus in condescending ways! He wants Lazarus to bridge the gap between his place of torment and where Lazarus is now with Abraham--- and serve him. But his request is rejected, because of the chasm that now exists between the rich man and Lazarus. Actually, the gap existed even when the rich man was alive. The next request to Abraham is to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of their own fate. (Sounds like Jacob Marley’s warning visit to Ebenezer Scrooge doesn’t it? But it isn’t Christmas yet.) The request is denied. Had they listened to the scriptures (and here the reference is to the Hebrew text) they should have gotten the message. God hasn’t just recently gotten concerned about the poor, it has been a constant theme from the Genesis, the very first book of the bible.

The Amos reading is a natural complement to the Gospel reading. The shepherd/prophet Amos is speaking to the rich and powerful of the land. They had the "lions share" of the earth's riches. At the same time they believe that they are receiving special benefits for their

relationship with God. Amos acknowledges Israel's special place but also claims this will be the very cause of its downfall, since Israel did not fulfill its special mission to be the elect. Previously (5:20) Amos had spoken of "the day of the Lord". The rich and comfortable looked forward to it as a moment of joy and final triumph promised by God. But Amos says that "day" will be a day of gloom, exactly because of the way the rich have behaved.

Notice the poetic images to depict the contrasting states of rich and poor: "beds of ivory" vs. the usual straw pallets of the poor; the rich eat meat, while the poor rarely have it; the rich have time to compose songs (ironically compared to David's songs), while the poor have no free time. What the people saw as signs of political stability, Amos says is intolerable to God. His words drip with disgust. These very rich will be the first to go into Exile; and unfortunately, the poor will suffer too. The preacher might make use of contemporary images to contrast the appeals of our society to comfort, bodily extravagances, "the good life", etc. and show how we are seduced by the images that appear on tv and movies. Meanwhile, the poor keep growing in number. Careful, do not just get angry, or accusatory here. The reason for this prophet's strong oracle is to awaken people from their false illusions about God and what we call "blessings." This reading is a wakeup call, and in that, continues to show God reaching out to us through a prophet of "doom and gloom."

JUSTICE NOTES:

(Our notes are a bit longer than usual, but they may provide the preacher with some material to illustrate today's parable of the rich man and Lazarus.)

A live-and-let-live ethos is not up to addressing some of the major social questions we face today. Specifically, it cannot address the struggles of poor African Americans in urban centers. The populations of the inner cores of many large American cities are heavily African American, and they are mostly poor. Their lives are marked by economic deprivation, unemployment, single parenthood, homelessness and frightening drug-related violence. Tolerance alone cannot produce an adequate response to these realities. For the following reasons we need a stronger vision of the common good to address them.

First, most middle-class Americans live in neighborhoods that isolate them from people of significantly different socioeconomic backgrounds. This isolation is due to the apparently impersonal forces of the real estate market, but it is sustained by zoning laws and other boundaries that result from political choice rather than geography. To challenge these divisions requires an understanding of the common good that reaches beyond the boundaries between homogeneous groups of the like-minded, and between the middle-class and the very poor.

Second, pursuit of community by middle-class Americans often takes forms that deepen the

crisis of the inner cities. Suburbanites today often live in what Robert Bellah has called "lifestyle enclaves." People in such enclaves find their identities in interaction with other persons with similar patterns of appearance, consumption and leisure. These communal relationships are based on some feature of private rather than public life. The bonds they forge are more like those among members of the same club than among fellow citizens concerned for the good of the wider community. So, the need for community, when expressed in suburban lifestyle enclaves, can lead to the construction of walls and moats in the form of bigger and better malls and tougher zoning ordinances. These strengthen the locks on the growing number of gated communities that protect the privileged from the poor.

Third, increased racial tolerance among white suburbanites is not the master key that will unlock the doors that keep the poor of the inner city from sharing in the national well-being. Socioeconomic class differences between suburb and inner city are more important in sustaining these boundaries than are negative racial attitudes. To be sure, racial prejudice continues to be an operative force in American life. But it is also clear that overtly racist attitudes have notably declined over recent decades. This attitudinal change has not been accompanied by an improvement in the situation of blacks who live in the inner city. African Americans at the lower end of the economic spectrum continue to live in dire straits; nearly 10 million live in poverty. This is close to 25 percent of the black population in the United States. Blacks are 2.6 times more likely to be poor than are European Americans. Hardest hit are black children.

....We live in a dangerously divided nation. If we are to begin the task of securing minimal justice, we need to overcome these divisions. The urban poor are citizens of the American republic, and we have a duty to treat them as such. To begin doing so, we need a renewed commitment to a good that must be there for us all if it is to be there for any of us. When we begin to take steps toward this shared good, we will be on a path marked out for us by the deepest traditions of Western and Christian thought. We will be on the path toward an American public life healed of some of its deepest wounds and on the way to a new realization of the good that is common.

---David Hollenbach, S.J., **The Common Good and Urban Poverty.** America, June 5, 1999, COPYRIGHT 1999 America Press, Inc.