

PROPER 21, PENTECOST 16, YEAR C, SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

Jesus spoke most often about money and today's gospel lesson is no different. This parable is not about heaven and hell but about the disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Some food for thought. Did you know that as of last year 10% of Americans owned 70% of all the wealth in our country? 1% of that ten percent owns 33% while the bottom 50% own 2.6%. As I said, Jesus spoke more about money the most than any other topic. Why is that? If you look at all the stories and parables he told he was not condemning people who had wealth it was about the misuse of it.

In this parable Jesus describes the economic disparity between an unnamed rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Jesus tells us about a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, who "feasts sumptuously every day," while Lazarus, starved and covered in sores, languishes at the rich man's gate. Though Lazarus is perfectly visible — he longs to gather even a crumb or two from the rich man's ornate dining table — the rich man neither acknowledges Lazarus's presence, nor alleviates his suffering. In fact, the neighborhood dogs show the poor man more compassion than his wealthy human counterpart; they at least come and lick his sores.

I think it's telling that Jesus does not give the man a name rather refers to him as "the rich man." On the other hand he gives the poor man the name Lazarus which in Hebrew means "God has helped". In Judaism to name someone is not just about identity but your name is the key to your soul. So, by not giving the rich man a name Jesus is in one sense saying this man has no soul.

The rich man was undoubtedly blessed but unwilling to let his blessings flow through to others. He preferred to be uninvolved, not engaged, not even seeing or hearing those around him as he was indifferent to Lazarus who sat at the entrance to his home. He was living a good life and not allowing any of his blessings to touch the lives of others.

If we think about it, being human is always about transcending narrow self-interest and the law of survival of the fittest. It is about looking beyond "ME" to "US", beyond immediate self-gratification to the long-term interests of the community.

In today's world, we know there is a sentiment that anyone who benefits from government programs is lazy, doesn't work and is just looking for handouts. We can all fall prey to those attitudes as well as believing that government programs create dependency. However, we all also know it only takes a catastrophic event whether it's a health issue, losing a job, or even a natural disaster that destroys your home that can send you over the edge. We peg these people as lazy yet the majority of people on government assistance are working. And yes, there will always be people who know how to bilk the system but that percentage is quite low – about 1 -2% and to put it into perspective white collar crime cost people and businesses in America over 400 billion to a trillion dollars a year.

When we believe that wealth and privilege are simply our due we ascribe to the belief that the poor are to be blamed for their own condition. However, our Christian faith tells us that the human race will survive only if we work together and care for one another, and pay attention to the environment in which we live and move and have our being. We need to do that in order to be whole, healthy and faithful to God.

God's care has always been expressed through the compassion of those who know that worship of God must be accompanied by justice and mercy. Trust, hope and

goodwill will be possible for the poor, the needy and their families only if we respond to their need for compassionate care.

In today's gospel the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water to cool his tongue, but Abraham reminds the rich man that his lack of compassion in his earthly life has created an unbridgeable gulf. The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his equally callous brothers; but Abraham says you had Moses and the prophets to teach you what makes you think that someone returning from the dead will convince them to change their ways. Their smug, self-centered lifestyle has robbed them of their capacity for compassion, of their very humanity. And this is really what Hell is all about. It is about the loss of our ability to be with, and feel with, others. And it is not God who consigns us there, but we ourselves.

The key danger Jesus identifies in the pursuit of material comforts and riches is the danger of blindness; of moral apathy and indifference; of a fundamental inability to see human need, human suffering, human dignity, and human worth as real. In life, it's very likely that the rich man noticed Lazarus but chose not to do anything. Even in death the rich man still doesn't get it. Even after death, the rich man fails to see Lazarus. Privilege just plain clings to him even in Hades! Though he piously calls on "Father" Abraham, he refuses to see Lazarus as anything other than an errand boy: "Bring me water." "Go warn my brothers." No wonder Abraham tells him that the "chasm" separating the two realms is too great to cross. Let's be clear: God is not the one who builds the chasm. We do that all by ourselves.

I think Jesus tells this story to help us rid ourselves of the belief that we are better than someone who has less than we do. Jesus wants our blessings to flow to others. That can only happen when we allow ourselves to see, hear and smell the needs that exist around us. And that cannot happen if we stay indifferent or stay complacent. It cannot happen if we keep blaming the poor for their situation and lumping everyone together and saying "they're just bilking the system. There is generational poverty, homelessness, lack of education that are real causes of poverty that we want to and continue to ignore.

Jesus talked a lot about people who had "hard hearts." Their hearts were so hard that their eyes were blind. Their hearts were so hard that nothing could make a dent in them. Jesus often complained about people who could so easily focus on what's wrong with their neighbor, while completely ignoring the same thing in themselves. Sometimes it's quite amazing what we choose to see and not see.

Do we even realize how our lives are intertwined with so many others around the world every day we get up. If we have a cup of coffee in the morning, we are connected to the pickers of the coffee beans who are not paid a living wage. When we put on clothes, most likely some of them were made where people work in sweatshop conditions. If we buy fruits and vegetables, most likely they were picked by migrant workers. Our lives are inextricably intertwined with the lives of people we don't know, and yet we benefit from their labors and from their poverty. We *are* all brothers and sisters.

Remember, this story is being told by Jesus to teach us how to be people of faith. Faith is practical. Faith is reaching out to others with unconditional love. It is living a life that searches for the lost. It is a life that forgives and cancels debts. It is a life that is committed to the needs of those around us.

So the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a story about the present. How we connect to the world today is crucial. It is what we do, now, at this very moment that determines whether we live in a bubble of indifference or in community.

By world standards most of us are rich, some of us very rich. None of us does not know that God has called us to love and serve our neighbors in need. But are we listening? Can we conceive of ways to make that happen and help others? I was standing in the check out line in Shop Rite on Friday and I heard the clerk ask the elderly woman in front of me if she would like to donate a \$1.00 to their Partners in Caring program. The woman looked at the clerk and replied if I can't give a dollar to someone who is hungry I have no business buying all this food for myself. Shame on anyone who won't part with a dollar. Yes, we can do something and yes God is very serious about that?

For when we serve the poor we care for our own souls by imitating the character of God. In so doing, we will come to know what it means to be not only a good steward of what God has given us but we will truly become an extension of God's love to others. Amen.