

Homily 9/28

Luke 16:19-31

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Help us, dear Lord, to keep our lives in balance. Guide us, so to use and share our wealth to benefit the poor, our communities, God's creation that surrounds us, and our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

May we never fail to see Lazarus in our midst.

Amen

Good morning

The last time I was in this pulpit I preached on Luke chapter 12, verses 13-21 – the story of the foolish rich man who thought that at last he had everything in life and could sit back and relax - until he found out that God had other plans for him - that very night. Today's gospel is that of yet another rich man. I will say I wondered why I had the good fortune to preach back to back on parables of rich men but I thought perhaps there were many such parables. However it turns out that Jesus gave only two parables specifically on rich men although he preached a great deal about wealth and the harm that it's misuse could do and the good that could be done with it.

So in this world that we live in - in which billionaires are becoming commonplace and the race is on to become the world's first trillionaire (1 trillion is 1,000 billions – those are the kind of numbers I think of when we're counting stars not accumulating dollars) – in this world in which inequities between the wealthy few and the rest of us are becoming more pronounced - in this world in which many of us would be considered rich even though we would not call ourselves rich - In this world it is interesting to listen to not only to Jesus' parable but to listen closely to every one of today's readings.

Let's just take a minute and go back to the first reading from Amos where he says "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches ... eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; ... but who are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph".

Now the ruin of Joseph isn't a phrase we hear a great deal - actually it only appears in this passage from Amos. It symbolizes the judgment and destruction that would come upon Israel due to their unfaithfulness and disregard for the plight of the poor and oppressed. In the time in which Amos was writing (around 760-753 BC), Israel had experienced long periods of peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, that prosperity had accrued for the most part to the wealthy. The poor remained; and grew even more poor.

In Psalm 146 we hear "happy are they ... Who give justice to those who are oppressed and food those who hunger. ... (who) sustains the orphan and widow."

In the epistle reading, Paul writing to Timothy, says "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share..."

And finally we come to the reading from Luke – the second rich man parable. Now this parable tells of a rich man and a poor man who both died on the same day. The rich man had lived an opulent and showy life. He "dressed himself in purple and fine linen" and "feasted sumptuously every day."

At that time, in the countries of the Roman empire, dining was often done outside in a courtyard which could be seen from the street, visible to passers-by who could see how important the diner was and how important his guests were. Those passers-by might not notice an emaciated beggar lying by the rich man's gate - a gate installed to keep people such as the beggar at bay.

Now bear in mind that Jesus did not usually name the people in his parables. But in this one parable he did name the beggar. His name is Lazarus (not to be confused with the Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead - that's a different story). Now I've heard some different explanations for why in this parable Jesus would name one of the characters. There's speculation that he was referring to an event which had just taken place, one to which his listeners would relate, particularly if given the name of the beggar. It could be that or it could just be the respect that Jesus is giving to that poor man by giving him a name. A respect he does not extend to the rich man.

Whatever is the correct explanation for Jesus identifying Lazarus being by name, the story continues on with both Lazarus and the rich man dying. Now Lazarus is taken to the "bosom of Abraham" - a blessed and peaceful place to which the righteous dead go after death. I think we can think of that as heaven

The rich man who lived a self-centered and selfish life has been cast into Hades where he is being tormented.

Looking up he sees Lazarus and Abraham far away. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus "to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue". Abraham replies you had your good fortune when you were alive - Lazarus didn't. Besides that there's a great chasm between us so Lazarus can't go to you.

Now this sounds hard and unforgiving but I wonder who dug that great chasm? Abraham says "it has been fixed there"

presumably by God as he created heaven and hell but might we look a bit deeper. Do you think it could have been the rich man who constructed the chasm for himself? To separate himself from Abraham and all his teachings about how to live a good and righteous life? To separate himself from Lazarus who in life had daily provided that rich man with the opportunity to do good?

Do you think that, sumptuous meal by sumptuous meal, he could have dug a chasm deeper and deeper - a shovelful at a time? He must have known that that dirty beggar was outside his gate and he ignored him. Didn't give him a scrap of food, left him out there with the dogs to lick his wounds. Do you think every time he did that he dug that chasm a bit deeper?

And, even as he lies in torment, the rich man is not saying to Abraham "I am so sorry for the life I've lead. I could have cared for people but didn't. I could have used my riches for the betterment of others but didn't. I could have loved my fellow man - maybe not as much as myself but at least a little bit."

But that's not what the rich man is saying. He sees Lazarus as a servant that can be sent to provide him comfort. Send Lazarus to give me some water. Send Lazarus - this man to whom I never gave even a scrap of food - send him to comfort me.

Hmmm... I think the rich man is in torment and wants his suffering to be assuaged. I don't think he's really changed. I don't think he has learned that the chasm is of his own making and is so deep that it separates him not only from Lazarus' comfort but from God.

So how about the rich man's next request - I have five brothers. Send Lazarus to them. Tell them to change their ways.

Send Lazarus to them? This rich man could not send a lowly servant to Lazarus to give him a drink of water as he lay in torment outside the man's gate. And now the rich man says "Send Lazarus to my brothers"?

But maybe we're getting somewhere with this rich man. At least we see a side of him that's loving of his family. But again his demand or request isn't granted because Abraham says there is so much in the scripture and the prophets to teach your brothers how to live a righteous life - why would Lazarus coming back from the dead make any difference?

The scripture and the prophets – think back to this morning's readings - Amos the prophet, the psalms – those were available to the rich man and his five brothers.

Perhaps with all the stories in the old testament - many of them exciting, heartwarming, puzzling - it's easy to miss all the times we find the repeated directions - feed the hungry, care for the poor, heal the sick, protect the widow, welcome the stranger. Again and again in the psalms and in the prophets we hear those words.

The rich man could not claim that he was unaware of God's teaching. He knew it was wrong to put himself first before all those whom God had told him to care for. To put himself first before God.

And what about us? What about today's society? Can we claim that we are living our lives in line with the teaching of the Bible, the prophets, the psalms, the teachings of Jesus? Those words so clearly spoken again and again.

Do we sit in our courtyards dressed in purple eating sumptuous food, drinking fine wine? Do we focus on the expensive trappings we think will make us happy – the high-end car, the lengthy vacation, the extensive wardrobe? When we hear the stories of the very rich – maybe not the billionaires, but the other very rich with yachts and houses and expensive clothing - do we envy them? Do we want what they have?

Or does something in our hearts say, couldn't more of that be spent on alleviating hunger or providing medicine for children that need it? We have children in our own country who go to bed hungry at night. There are children across the world who are hungry all the time.

Yet I wonder how seriously we all take the repeated message "feed the hungry".

We have children in our own country, whose parents cannot afford expensive medication or medical treatments, there are children in the world, whose parents cannot afford the most basic of medical care. How seriously do we take the message “heal the sick”?

I like to think that we’re not collectively the rich man. For many of us, and I think especially for this parish, that we do look for ways to feed the hungry and support the homeless. But do we do enough? We need to encourage ourselves to be better still - to build on what we’ve already done - to make make even a bigger difference in the world.

Don’t ignore the beggar at your gate. Give him the dignity of a name, look in his eyes, look at the sores on his body.

See Jesus there - and then go and do what your heart calls you to do.

You know we’ve talked about the rich man and his impact on people around him but we might also, during this season of creation, think a bit about how the desire for wealth endangers the natural world around us.

Some of those impacts are pretty obvious - despoiling water ways to increase manufacturing profits, invasive mining practices in fragile ecosystems, burning fossil fuels with little concern for the impact on air quality

There’s little we can do directly about some of those things but we can have impact through our votes and through our support of organizations that work to protect the environment. And there are things we can do locally even in our own kitchens. We can carefully separate recyclable trash from other trash and, maybe if we have a place for a little compost pile we can even compost some of our vegetable scraps and reduce to a small degree our overall trash “footprint”. We can support

organizations that work to safeguard endangered species. At our forum today we will hear about an ongoing effort of many years to protect the riverfront in our own town and in the neighboring towns of Rocky Hill and Glastonbury. There are opportunities to take part in this effort and others like it.

God doesn't ask us to do it all ourselves. God asks us to be part of the solution - not part of the problem - and to do what we can with our own means. When you go home I would hope that you would spend a little time just thinking about what small thing you could do differently to help others in need. What you could do to help care for God's creation.

And then, if you can only help in a small way, go do it!

Amen