

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

Amos 6: 1, 4-7
Psalm 146: 7, 8-10
I Tim 6: 11-16
Luke 16: 19-31

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It is no sin to be rich, even though Jesus did say that the rich would have a harder time getting into heaven than the rest of us would. But there's no virtue in being poor either, even if Jesus once did call the poor "blessed." Today's Gospel story helps to explain Jesus' point of view and illustrates by way of a very concrete example just how riches can be a hazard to entrance into the Father's kingdom.

Two men are presented to us in the Gospel story today. One is a nameless rich man who, we are told, dressed luxuriously and feasted splendidly; the other is Lazarus, a poor beggar, who sat by the gate of the rich man's home every day, hoping for leftovers from the table. The story says nothing about the rich man mistreating or abusing Lazarus. The implication, however, is that his offense, his sin, was failing to do the poor man some good. Enveloped in his own luxury, he was at best unaware of Lazarus sitting at his gate, or at worst, unmoved by his sorry plight. The sin of the rich man was the sin of omission - failing to respond to human tragedy when he could have made a difference. He remained uninvolved, disinterested. His words would have been, "it's no concern of mine."

But notice the change that comes over the rich man when he dies. Now he's in torment, and his suffering seems to humanize him a bit. Even though he is told that he cannot get any relief for his suffering, he makes a plea on behalf of his five brothers: "send Lazarus to warn them..." All of a sudden he knows who Lazarus is and his interest is no longer limited to himself. "send Lazarus to warn them so that they can repent and not wind up here also." But repent of what? Presumably of a similar lack of concern or compassion or interest toward the less fortunate who surround them in daily life.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that there are two ways in which we can fall off the wagon - so to speak - on our pilgrimage through life. One is by the deliberate, conscious and willful choices we make to do harm, cause injury, inflict pain by word or thought or action. The other is more subtle, more hidden perhaps, more damaging in the long run - and that is the failure to do something positive where the opportunity presents itself. It's what Jesus often made reference to when he spoke to us about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick. The failure to do these things is not something neutral, it is truly something negative.

You and I are part of the Gospel story today. We are the five brothers of the rich man who, through this Gospel passage, has himself come to us from the dead, to remind us of the lesson he learned too late. The moments - brief or lengthy - of our own personal deprivation or pain or want hopefully will serve the good purpose of making us more compassionate than the rich man was and, therefore, more alert and responsive to the deprivations and pains and needs of others around us. The question asked of God way back at the beginning of the Bible is answered once more today in Jesus' story, "Yes, you are your brother's keeper, and your sister's and your neighbor's."