

Proper 21 – 18 Pentecost – Year C – September 26, 2010
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91: 1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6: 6-19; Luke 16:19-31
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Shout out if you can name the top three wealthiest men in the world. They are in fact Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Carlos Slim Hélu of Mexico. What about the three wealthiest women in the world? They are Christy Walton, Alice Walton, and Liliane Bettencourt. Now let's name the poorest people in the world. Anyone? Actually, when it comes to the poorest, the lists are done by nation and country rather than by individual. The poorest countries of the world are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and Burundi. All are in Africa. Final question, how come we find it so easy to name the wealthy, and yet the poorest remain largely invisible and anonymous to us?

The first thing we notice from today's Gospel story is that the rich man remains nameless, whatever status he has because of his evident and extravagant wealth. On the other hand, the poor man is called Lazarus. As the story unfolds, we discover that neither worldly wealth nor earthly poverty is anything to God. The rich man is not named because of his hardness of heart, and neglect of God's commands to care for the poor. Faithful Lazarus, on the other hand, is so close to God's heart that he finds himself lying in the arms of Abraham, who is righteous and generous in his hospitality to strangers.

Scripture always helps us to interpret Scripture. In this case, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, described earlier in Luke as "lovers of money". As Jesus sees it, the Pharisees love money more than mercy; love possessions more than people; and love clothes more than compassion. This reading gives us an obvious link between the right use of money, and care of the poor. Being wealthy is not condemned. It is failing to use our resources to do God's work that is unrighteous in God's eyes. The gaping chasm in this world is a failure to live and work for justice and equality.

For God's view of justice as it relates directly to the care of the poor we can start almost anywhere in Scripture. The prophets are full of admonitions to care for the poor. The prophet Isaiah says, "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them" (Isaiah 41:17). Biblically, names have meaning. In Greek the name Lazarus means "whom God helps". Ezekiel's prophetic words condemn the people for their merciless excesses, saying, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). God speaks through the prophet Zechariah, "do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another" (Zechariah 7:10). The prophet Micah is clear, "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Mary the mother of Jesus tells of a great reversal of fortunes portended by the Word made flesh, proclaiming, "[God's] mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:50-53). In Jesus' first hometown sermon, He shares His mission to the world confirming that the prophet's words are fulfilled in Him: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). In the sermon on the plain, Jesus says to His disciples, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6: 20). The prophet Amos' words also resonate with today's parable, "For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:12, 15).

The first boundary that we find in the parable of the nameless rich man and Lazarus is also a gate. As Amos suggests, the city gate is the traditional seat of justice for all. The gate of the rich man is not a gate of justice, but a boundary in many ways, including the ability to shut out Lazarus from his sight and from his table. Today, we have other ways to shut out the neediest people in our communities. For example,

homeowners associations don't just limit what color we can paint our homes, they define whether our communities are literally gated or not, as well as requiring a certain type or standard of dwelling on each parcel of land within a community. Homeowners associations are not anonymous entities that we can ingenuously point our fingers at; they are comprised of people. Individuals like me and you, people with both money and conscience, with both rights and responsibilities. Perhaps another way that we build walls around ourselves is simply that we find it expeditious to drive almost everywhere we go, making it much easier to keep our eyes on the road, and ignore the transient with his or her dirty, crumpled cardboard sign begging for money at the corner of Wal-Mart and Show Low Lake Road. It gets a little harder to be blind to the hardships faced by the poor, when the beggar is standing right outside the front doors of Safeway, or when he or she walks into our parish office, like Jim, Lily, and Frank did in the last few weeks. Failing to see, is no excuse in God's eyes.

When I was nine, on the last day of school, the teacher told us all to bring in dress up clothes for a little play we were to do. The general theme was the greeting of the equivalent of royalty -- Miss Moneybags, by name -- who was supposed to make her grand entrance, and then show her great beneficence to the poor people in the village. By God-incidence, the teacher chose me to play the role of Miss Moneybags. Getting into character without too much effort, I swept into the transformed classroom with as much grandeur as any nine year-old wearing shoes that are at least three sizes too big can manage. I smiled condescendingly and threw a little fake money into the crowd, without even noticing my classmate who was trying to present me with a bouquet of flowers. I breezed right by her, and then the teacher called time out, pointing out my egregious error through somewhat gritted teeth. Feeling appropriately humbled, we replayed the scene. Miss Moneybags did better the second time through, seeking out my classmate in the crowd, and graciously accepting her gift. The lesson was not lost. The teacher had helped me to see, and then act responsibly and responsively, with rather more humility than I managed the first time through.

In this life, we get the chance for do over's. With Jesus as our teacher and guide, we each have the opportunity to make right today what we have ignored, denied, or missed in our blindness, pride, or arrogance. The parable implies that at some point the gate of opportunity will be closed and bolted. The gap that either grows or shrinks as a consequence of our actions and inaction, the daily decisions we make to love God and our neighbor or not, becomes fixed. All the missed opportunities for making visible God's justice and mercy, God's love and compassion, move to the accounts payable line. As Paul writes, in Romans chapter 14:10-12, "[W]hy do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God." Jesus' moral challenge to us is to open our eyes to see God in the world around us; to see the face of Christ in everyone we meet; to see the Holy Spirit pointing out the path of righteousness. The ministry of every follower of Christ is to make visible what the world is blind to, including suffering and injustice, and to take action. The body of Christ is the new gate of justice, at the entrance of God's kingdom, welcoming the nameless and invisible ones as Christ's own. Stepping out of privilege to become poor in spirit is one of the hardest journeys of our lives. Martin Luther once said, "For where faith is, there is no anxiety for fine clothing and sumptuous feasting, ... there is no longing for riches, honor, pleasure, influence and all that is not God." Loving God and our neighbors *is* living our faith with vision, because as Jonathan Swift says, "vision is the art of seeing things invisible."

Amen.