

26th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (September 25, 2022)

Jesus just doesn't let up, does he? In recent weeks we have heard him say that we can't be his disciple unless we renounce all our possessions, and that we cannot serve both God and mammon (i.e. material wealth). And today we have the parable of the rich man who ended up in eternal torment because he did nothing to help the poor man Lazarus in his hunger and need. Is Jesus declaring money or material wealth to be evil and that those who have such wealth are automatically condemned to eternal punishment?

No, he is not. St. John Paul II once said regarding this parable: "Nowhere does Christ condemn the mere possession of earthly goods as such. Instead, he pronounces very harsh words against those who use their possessions in a selfish way, without paying attention to the needs of others." In the first reading we heard the Old Testament prophet Amos speak in the same way—pronouncing 'woe' upon the 'complacent in Zion', those leaders who were living only in and for their own comfort and heedless of the distress and needs of others. The rich man in the gospel parable is condemned not because he is rich, but because he allowed his wealth to blind him to the needs and even the presence of the poor Lazarus lying at his door. The rich man was so caught up in his fine garments and delicious meals—he was so caught up in himself—that he didn't even notice someone starving at his own front door.

It is so important to keep that distinction in mind. It is often said that 'money is the root of all evil.' Actually, that is a misquote of a passage from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy immediately preceding our second reading today. Paul does not say that money is the root of all evil; he says 'the love of money is the root of all evil' (1 Tim. 6:10). And that is something entirely different. If money in and of itself was truly evil, then we would each be sinning by earning an income, and this parish should not be giving you a box of budget envelopes every year! Of course, we all have bills to pay and we need the wherewithal to pay those bills. And don't worry: you will all be getting your 2023 budget envelopes in just a few months; I promise you...

It is, of course, the attitude, the frame of mind we have toward money or material wealth that has moral implications. Do we recognize that everything we have comes ultimately from God and not only from our own efforts? If we do, then we will take care to use that wealth wisely, generously, and gratefully—we will be the kind of stewards of those gifts that God calls us to be. Or do we focus only on ourselves, our own pleasures, desires and interests—unaware of or uninterested in the needs of others?

Jesus leaves us no room for doubt. He calls us to live not just for ourselves. The sin is not having wealth; it's having a tunnel vision, putting on the blinders to the needs of others, and focusing only on ourselves. So what do we do; how do we respond to the needs around us? Obviously, no one person can respond to or fulfill all needs everywhere, and we cannot or need not respond to every appeal that comes to us in the mail or that we see in the media. But we need to ask: what can I do with what God has given me? Who is the Lazarus at my front door—whether or not a literal beggar as shown in this gospel? After all, poverty and need exist in a whole variety of ways:

- There surely are those in material poverty or need, and our monetary donations to those causes that speak to our own hearts are very helpful.
- But how about the Lazarus who is the unborn child in danger at the local Planned Parenthood clinic or who is the young single pregnant mother who is abandoned by the child's father and rejected by her own family: do we pray for them, help them through Birthright or other pro-life efforts because they are beloved of God...or do we turn away and think: "nope, not my problem"?
- How about the Lazarus who may take the form of an immigrant in our midst, whatever their legal status, who is desperately trying to support his/her family: do we show them a kindness and compassion—even a simple smile or a friendly greeting-- that they deserve as being made in the image and likeness of God like us...or do we ignore them and wish they would just go back where they came from?
- For you young people in our schools: maybe Lazarus is that classmate who nobody likes, who's a real nerd and who is not in the popular crowd, who doesn't wear the 'right' kind of shoes or shirt. Do you make an effort to talk with them, treat them with kindness and respect (as you want to be treated)... or do join the crowd in making fun of them or ignore them because they're just so weird?
- Maybe there is even a Lazarus in your own family—perhaps a spouse who may be hurting or upset about something, a parent you are angry with, a child who disobeyed or misbehaved once too often. Do you see that hurt or resentment or anger in that spouse/parent/child and try to respond constructively and lovingly, taking that first and necessary good step toward reconciliation...or are you so caught up in your own bitterness and resentment that you shut yourselves off and go no further?

We are all rich, so blessed by God in so many different ways—no matter what our bank account balance may be. There is a Lazarus (likely more than one) in each of our lives as well—who show up in so many different ways. Do we choose to see them, remember their dignity as fellow sons and daughters of our loving God and Father, and respond to them in their needs as we are able? Or do we focus so much on ourselves and our pleasures like the parable's rich man that we don't even take any notice of them? Jesus could not have been any clearer: our eternal destiny really does depend on our answer to those questions and how we live out that answer.