

Homily Pentecost 19C
September 25, 2016
Grace, River Forest

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

The Life That Really Is Life

In Jesus' name. Amen

He was living the life of Riley. That is *he*, the rich man in today's Gospel. We can tell because Jesus says he was dressed in upper crust attire – purple and fine linen. And we're told he "feasted sumptuously every day." Who knows, maybe he had his own chef who had trained at Cordon Bleu in France. And, oh, yes – we're told his house was in a "gated" community. He was living the life of Riley.

And what were things like in Old Testament times? There were folks then, too, living in the lap of luxury. No question about it. Amos says they were "at ease," not seeming to care at all in their comfort about "the ruin of Joseph," the northern kingdom of Israel being attacked by the Assyrians. They were lying on beds of ivory and lounging on their couches – just exactly what I was planning to do in retirement! They were idly singing songs and drinking wine, and eating tender lamb and expensive veal. They were living the life of Riley.

According to Jesus, there was a poor man named Lazarus lying at the rich man's gate – lying there probably because he was crippled. And he wasn't

“covered” in purple or fine linen, but in oozing “sores” which roving dogs would lick. And the poor man in Jesus’ parable, we are told, “longed to satisfy his hunger” not even with a sit down meal, but just with the crumbs that “fell from the rich man’s table.”

And what are things like today, in our times? Just as in Jesus’ parable, there are rich and poor, some eating gourmet meals, while it is a hard-scrabble existence even to survive for others. But seldom today do we find Lazarus right at our gate. Oh, we do run into homeless persons on a downtown street, or at the entrance to the I-290 expressway at Harlem. But generally there is “a great chasm fixed” between where we live, and the poor --in neighborhoods on the south and west sides of Chicago, where we don’t even like to venture. And there are the other hidden poor -- across the world from us in refugee camps, or in Third World countries, where famine is still rampant.

And there is another major difference between the parable Jesus told and our situation today. The names we know are the names of the wealthy. Warren Buffet. Bill and Melinda Gates. Donald Trump. But the poor? They are generally the anonymous poor. Mere statistics to us. Jesus’ parable tells us it is different where God is concerned. The person in the story who has a name is the poor man, Lazarus. And there’s something even more remarkable: Lazarus is the only

person with a name in *any* of Jesus' parables. Except for Lazarus, it is only the Samaritan, the priest, the Levite, the father, the prodigal son, the elder brother, the sower who went out to sow, the woman who took a lamp and swept everywhere in her house, and so on. Jesus is telling us something here about God's concern for the lost and least and lowly. In Luke's Gospel, we first hear this message from Mary's lips in the Magnificat, when she sings "ahead of time," before her son Jesus is even born, about what God in Christ will do: bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty. We see an example of this "reversal" Mary sang of, in the afterlife scene described by Jesus in this parable.

One commentary I read, though, reminds us "eavesdroppers" on this parable that the "rich man is not pictured as inherently wicked. He does not persecute Lazarus, nor does he refuse him food, nor does he sponsor legislation to rid the gates of poor people like Lazarus." (Charles B. Cousar, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, p. 119) He isn't exploiting the poor, profiting from them, as some rich do. His problem is simply that he doesn't "see" Lazarus, because he is so wrapped up in himself. As another Bible scholar puts it, "One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness." (John Donahue, as quoted by Cousar, *ibid.*, pp. 119, 121) And in the scene of the

afterlife, we see one other flaw in the rich man: his sense of entitlement. He wants Abraham to order Lazarus about, like a servant, to do his bidding.

Abraham's response is "no."

So where do we find ourselves in this story today?

I think most of us – not all, but most -- are part of the rich man's family, his surviving brothers and sisters, or maybe his children and grandchildren. Why? Because most of us gathered in this church today fall into the category of the rich – not the 1%, but the rich, compared to the rest of the world. Yes, we worry about unexpected expenses, and how, if we lose our job, how precarious our situation could be. But just two statistics: Almost half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day. (Poverty Facts and Stats, online, last updated in 2013) And close to 800 million people in the world are like Lazarus – they don't have enough food. (Hunger Statistics, online) This parable of Jesus is not trying to teach us anything about the afterlife; it is urging us, the rich man's relatives, to "see," really see, the Lazaruses of our world and do something about their situation.

We are called to get our "clues" on how to act, Abraham says, from Scripture, "from Moses and the prophets" – prophets like Amos, and from all our other readings, today, too. But more than that, we are called to a life that's even better than living the life of Riley.

We can have that life because someone really did rise from the dead, Christ Jesus, the one who “though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes...became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9) He emptied himself, even to the point of death on a cross, so that our poverty of spirit might be erased and replaced by Jesus’ own generosity. The author of our second reading today encourages Timothy to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” in baptism. Generally we think of eternal life as the gift we’ll receive after we’ve died. But it’s more than that. As one Bible commentator says, “It is something that has [already] arrived because Christ has arrived and brought eternity into our midst.” (Stephanie Mar Smith, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, p. 112) The psalmist says today, “The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.” (Psalm 146:8) That’s us. In his death and resurrection, Jesus restores our sight, so that we can see “Lazarus.”

We know from the psalm and from Jesus’ parable that God has a soft spot in God’s heart for those who are poor and hungry, those bowed down and oppressed. But what is God’s attitude toward the rich man? And toward us, the rich man’s modern-day siblings and children and grandchildren? The answer is not what we might fear. In the afterlife, Abraham calls the rich man, “Child.” And the truth is that while most of us are the rich man’s relatives, his siblings, children and

grandchildren, we are also, by grace, through baptism, Christ's brothers and sisters, and the children of God.

And God wants only the best for us, God's children. I Timothy, therefore, tells us, not to "set [our] hopes on the uncertainty of riches." The economy might crash again, as it's done before. And we're also warned in 1 Timothy to avoid "the love of money," which can so easily "plunge" us "into ruin and destruction."

And God wants not only the best for us, but the best from us. So the author of 1 Timothy reminds us who are rich "in this present age...not to be haughty." He calls us to pin our hopes on God who is the giver of every good gift we have received. And to be "rich" in the things that really matter: doing good, being generous and ready to share – our time, as much as our money.

This is what is better than living the life of Riley. This is taking hold "of the life that really is life," the eternal life "that has [already] arrived because Christ has arrived and brought eternity into our midst."

This is the life of Christ, alive and active in you.

I know. I've seen it firsthand.

In Jesus' name. Amen

