

Sermon – Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

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Grace Lutheran Church

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“Ignorance Undone”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Yesterday, the Grace Lutheran School cross country team competed at a meet in Arlington Heights. It was a beautiful day, if a bit hot, and our runners seemed game. For the most part, anyway. Shortly before their race, one child looked up at one of our coaches and said, with wonderful honesty, “I don’t think I want to run today.” Our coach replied with appropriate, inspirational words, and the child not only ran the race, but did a fine job. Much of which to be proud. But the coach was thinking the same thing I was thinking when they relayed this story to me: You don’t want to run? You do know that’s, like, the whole sport? It’s not running and jumping, running and passing, running and shooting a ball. It’s *running*. That’s it. That’s the whole game, buddy. One wonders if the child had been misinformed that such ignorance existed! Better, I suppose, than another child who told the same coach, while standing perfectly upright and obviously not in pain, “I think my hamstring is broken.” Our athletes, including these children, did Grace proud yesterday. Cross country is a difficult sport. But there’s no mistaking what it is: running. It’s impossible to be ignorant about this basic fact. It’s the whole game.
2. Ignorance abounds, of course; much of it willful. Oh, the things we pretend not to know. Take our rich man, for example. He seems to think that the reason he’s ended up in this parabolic Hades of torment and flames is because he didn’t have enough information. And if it’s too late for him, at

least perhaps Lazarus could take a break from paradise and go tell the rich man's brothers the fate that awaits them if they do not change their ways. I like how the rich man thinks he still has the power to boss around Lazarus even now. But Father Abraham is clear: Both the rich man and the brothers have always had all the information they've ever needed. Love God, love one another, these are the heart of the law and the prophets. And no, not even someone coming back from the dead will change their minds. Why? Because for these rich ones, ignorance truly is bliss. At least for the moment. The bliss of earthly luxury, eyes and hearts turned away from the sad suffering of countless people. What do you mean we're supposed to take care of the poor, Abraham? Buddy, that's the whole game. Always has been.

3. The law and the prophets are clear. Take Amos, at work in the northern Kingdom of Israel 750 years before Jesus. During his day, life under King Jeroboam II was good. Well, it was good if you were among the moneyed elite. But things were not so great for the poor, who suffered under rampant corruption and economic oppression. The gap between the wealthy and everyone else continue to grow. Oddly enough, I think I've heard this one before. But the God of justice will not stand for it. Alas for those who are at ease, who lay about in garish luxury, eating and drinking their fill, idling away the hours, willfully ignorant of the ruin of their people, willfully ignoring the cries of the poor. The rich man in Jesus' parable is not supposed to know something strange or esoteric; God has always wanted, expected, demanded the same thing. Not, by the way, that the rich shouldn't be rich. Rather, that they shouldn't turn away from people in need. That they shouldn't hide behind locked gates. That they shouldn't ignore those who suffer, especially as they have the means to help them.
4. Last week, I spent 36 hours in Washington, D.C., with about one hundred other Lutheran leaders. Under the theme, "Gathering at the Gate," we gathered to meet with members of congress and to offer public, faith-based,

Christ-centered witness and support for policies that will help the poorest in our nation, to stand against policies that would harm them while benefitting the already wealthy. Recent legislation, if left unchanged, will take away SNAP and Medicaid benefits from real people with real needs. 83,000 people in Illinois alone will lose access to food-purchasing assistance. 270,000 people in our state will lose health insurance. In case you're curious, eight in ten adults in IL who receive SNAP benefits work. Seven in ten adults in our state on Medicaid work. These people are not layabouts, but that argument is a red herring anyway. Ten out of ten people deserve access to food and health care. Ten out of ten. And our government is set to take these benefits away, without even bothering to reduce the deficit. These are not simply political issues; they are moral issues. Christians, this is right in our wheelhouse. Helping others, through efforts personal, private, and – yes – public? Buddy, that's the whole game. Our faith will not let us claim ignorance. We can continue as we are, but we don't dare claim we don't know any better. We gathered at the "gate" in D.C. because it is at the city gate, in the Book of Amos, where justice is to be sought. We gathered at the gate because it is time for the gates to swing open with the abundance that is available to all.

5. We have built seemingly-uncrossable chasms in this world between those who have and those who don't. Today's parable seems to be saying that the eternal chasm is even more severe. This is, of course, good news for those who suffer want and oppression in this world, and that includes some of us, some of the time. But what of the rest of us, most of the time? Cannot even Jesus, returned from the dead, give us hope? He can, but only because he can do what needs doing: raising us from death. We don't need someone back else from the dead. We need resurrection. Jesus isn't going to talk us into doing better. If that was enough, the law and the prophets would have sufficed. No; we are dead in our sin. Dead to the death-dealing systems and cycles of this world. We don't need better information. We need to be raised

from the dead. So, sinners, hear the good news: For the sake of Christ, you are forgiven. By the creative Word of God, you are dead no more. The uncrossable chasm has been crossed by the cross. Step over into the life that really is life.

6. We can't all go to Washington, of course. Nor should we. I mean, most of you have real jobs. I only work on Sundays; I had the time. And I don't know what will come of our modest efforts. But I know that every something is more than any nothing. As our evening preacher in Washington, Pastor Heidi Neumark, reminded us as she preached on the feeding of the 5,000, the miracles belong to Jesus. Our task, in his name, is to start where we are, with what we have, to do God's work. We cannot afford to be ignorant of what is going on around us, of the suffering at our gates. Alive in Christ, we can bring the riches of God's reign into this broken world today. Start where you are, with what you have, and remember that you have much. The Apostle Paul says it well: "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, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, ready to share." You were dead and now you're not. Seems to be a good time to get on with the life-giving work for which you were saved. Seems to be a good time to open the gate and help your neighbor in need. That, buddy, is the whole game. That, friends, is the life that really is life. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.