

19 Pentecost, Proper 21, Yr. C  
September 25, 2016  
Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

As some of you know, I spoke at Atonement one evening a week or so ago. I had intended to talk about anti-Semitism, but the conversation took on a life of its own and we ended up with a lively discussion about racism. At the conclusion of the evening, one of the people said that, regardless of our racial divisions, he thought we all wanted the same thing. That put me in mind of a seminar I once attended in which part of the program was to get you to figure out and articulate what you REALLY wanted. You did it with a partner, whose sole job was to keep asking, "But what do you really want?" It was designed to get you to think below the surface, to your deepest reality. So, that comment, WE ALL REALLY WANT THE SAME THING got me to thinking. First of all, do we? Do we really all, at the end of the day, want the same thing? And I think that we could make the argument that, as Christians, that is indeed the case. That when we get right down to the bottom of things, what we want is the kind of life, the kind of security that would come with life in God's kingdom, not just for us, but for everyone. Life in the creation that God intended from the very beginning. Every reading this morning cautions us to be sure we're putting our trust in the kind of thing that's ultimately reliable – not those things that will pass away, but those things that will endure for all eternity.

Wealth is front and center as one of those non-lasting things that we're tempted to rely on. But you'll note, with a careful reading, that it's not wealth per se, because wealth, in and of itself, is neutral. It's how we relate to it that matters. The letter to Timothy makes it explicit: it's the LOVE of money that's the root of all evil. Later in the letter, Paul tells Timothy to remind those he will be teaching that they shouldn't set their hopes on the "uncertainty of riches, but rather on God..." Everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God – but not an unqualified gift. Rather, we're stewards of those gifts, because whatever they are: money, education, vision, creativity – they're all given to us in trust and, like last week's steward, in the end we'll be asked to give an accounting of how we used them.

But of all the gifts, it seems like wealth is the one that gets the most attention in the Bible. Part of that has to be that it's so seductive, not just so we can have stuff, although that's part of it, but we that we can have all the other perks that go with wealth. When Jane and I were on the boat in Canada, one evening's entertainment was a singer and one of the songs he sang was the one from *Fiddler on the Roof* – you'll remember it: IF I WERE A RICH MAN. During the course of the song, Tevye lists the advantages of wealth: he'd have a big house with three stairways, one going up, a bigger one coming down and one that's going nowhere, just for show. And then he sings that his wife could put on airs and strut like a peacock and she could scream at the servants day and night. And then he talks about the deference he'll get –all the most important men in the village would come to get his advice and, he says, it wouldn't matter if he was right or wrong because when you're rich, they "think you really know." You can hear part of the seduction there, can't you? Status, deference, authority, power.

Tevye's song hints at another thing we do with wealth - we identify wealth with worth. Remember Downtown Abbey? Where the lower servants had to stand against the wall and

lower their eyes when the family walked by – they were to be invisible. An updated version of our parable, I think.

Another problem with wealth is that I think it's the gift that we're most apt to get confused about; it's the one that's most apt to lull us into a false security. That's what's going on in the reading from Amos. The translation we have begins with the Lord addressing the leaders of Israel, saying, "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, for those who feel secure..." There's another translation, similar, but perhaps more powerful, that starts this way: **WOE TO THE COMPLACENT.** Complacent – it's defined as self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies." (Websters) And that, clearly, is the sense of the Amos reading. The leaders of the nation are self-satisfied and blind to the impending disaster that is about to fall upon the nation. They're trapped in their self-indulgence and, therefore, oblivious to the destructive forces both within and without Israel. Why, he asks them. Do you think you're going to escape? Do you think your kingdom is better than others that have been destroyed? Are you somehow safer or more secure? And his images are powerful – the leaders aren't struggling with the nation's problems, they aren't feeling any urgency. Instead, they're lounging on beds of ivory and they're eating the young of the flocks, a strong indication of their lack of concern for the future. And, instead of being sick at heart at what's happening and what's going to happen, they're drowning themselves in wine. I think I told you the story that my OT professor told in class about being in Lebanon when that country was considered almost a paradise on earth, some years before the whole thing descended into a bitter and destructive civil war. He and some friends were eating a lovely dinner out on a balcony and he noticed that occasionally one of the diners would throw something he or she didn't want over the railing. That would be followed by noises of scrambling – they were throwing their unwanted food to the beggars below who were scrambling for the scraps in the bushes. At that moment, he said, he thought of the prophets, who didn't predict the future, but who could and DID say, that that kind of unconcern, that kind of inequality, the injustice that led to that kind of dynamic, would result in the country's fall. And we know that it did.

Those diners, however, did better than the rich man in the parable in Luke's gospel. At least they recognized that the beggars were down there. Looking at the parable, again you'll note there's no condemnation of the rich man because he's rich. The problem is that he's completely oblivious – both to Lazarus, who's right outside his door (in fact, one gets the sense that he must have had to step over him when he came and went) and to the fact that he has some kind of obligation to Lazarus.

So, here's where we need to think about WHY the rich man would have been so oblivious. How does this apply to us? What are reasons behind obliviousness?

Maybe sometimes it's pure selfishness.

But there are other things that keep us oblivious. In the Gospel you'll remember that Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees who, it was said earlier, had a love of money. They didn't love money solely for what it could do for them. They had some support because there are places in the scripture where it says that prosperity, money, means that God is smiling on you – he's approved of you and how you're living and so he's blessing you with riches. That kind of

thinking is alive and well in our time – now it's called the Prosperity Gospel – God wants you to be rich. But Jesus is telling the Pharisees that their interpretation of the Scripture is wrong. He points to all those other passages in the Bible (many more, in fact) those in the law of Moses and in the prophets that say, over and over, that we ARE our brother's keeper, that we need to care for one another – all those passages in the Torah that say that “you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor of the land.”

Sometimes, there's an effort made so we don't have to see. So, for instance, gated communities, or areas with restrictive covenants. Not too long ago, there was a book titled *Beyond the Beautiful Forever*. It's about the lives of people living in a slum in Mumbai just outside the international airport. The government wants them to be unseen because their existence is tarnishing India's reputation. So on the drive to the airport, one side is screened by a high gleaming fence and on the other side there's a long row of billboard advertising Italian tile with the words, BEAUTIFUL FOREVER, repeated over and over and running the full length of the drive to the airport entrance. And behind the Beautiful Forevers are people living in abject poverty, picking through garbage, stealing to live, suffering from police brutality and political corruption. Those who still have hope dream of the day when they'll have access to the garbage from the luxury hotels; those with hope go to far as to set themselves on fire.

Two things: one way or another, with our ubiquitous media, we now know – there's no longer any possibility of ignorance. Martin Luther King once said that, like it or not, we are all “tied in a single garment of destiny, an inescapable network of mutuality...And for some reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God made the world...we must all learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will all perish as fools.”

Was my conversation partner right when he said that we all want the same thing? He didn't say the Kingdom of God, but I think that's what we're called to. That's what Martin Luther King meant when he says that we're all in this together – brothers and sisters, sharing, loving, moving together toward the destiny God has created for us.

Amen.