

16 Pentecost, Proper 21, Yr. C.

September 29, 2019

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

At first glance, all the scriptures this morning seem to be warnings about riches and the danger they pose. And they definitely do that. But they go much deeper than that. They raise questions about our identity, about what we put at the center of our lives, about meaning, about what we think life is all about. Some of us no doubt remember the 1965 hit song, Alfie. (The internet is a wonderful thing, allowing one to look up old lyrics!) That pop song asked the same question: What's it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live? Are we meant to take more than we give? Or are we meant to be kind? I read about that same question in an interview with David Tracey, a theologian and philosopher, who talked about this as the existential problem of our time: that nihilism is pervasive; that people find life absurd and without meaning. And then, that same question, coming from a different direction – this time it was the presentation at the clergy conference in which we were shown a graph about meaning. It showed that most people found meaning in their families, fewer in their careers and in money, and fewer still in their faith.

So that's the question before us today. Where is our center? What makes our lives meaningful?

There are many things that can function as the center of our lives: wealth, status, power, politics, religious institutions, family, God. It's clear that the writers of the scriptures before us think that the biggest temptation is to put wealth at the center. Amos is our first reading and he's clear that wealth can foster a sense of complacency – not only lounging, but eating the calves from the stall because there's no need to worry about the future of the herd – their riches will keep them safe far into the future. And, similar to the concern Luke has, Amos points to the fact that the rich are distracted by their luxuries, and they either ignore or don't even see the "ruin of Joseph."

Paul's letter to Timothy points to the same problem. That those who want to be rich can fall into temptation and are trapped by many desires. You'll note that this letter is where we get the phrase about money being the root of all evil. You'll note further that it's not money, per se, that's the problem, but the love of money. And because it's the LOVE of money, both poor and rich can be trapped. The poor because they WANT it and the rich because they want to KEEP it. Both groups can be caught, thinking that their security and hope lie there, rather than with God. Don't go there, Paul tells Timothy. Instead, shun all that and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Why? Because that's where true life, eternal life, is to be found. It's a reminder of what we heard last week in the collect – to be aware of the difference between what's passing away and what's enduring. And, while Paul doesn't condemn the rich, he advises Timothy to command them not to be haughty, or to pin their hopes on their riches, but instead to use their riches to do good, to be generous and ready to share.

And then there's Luke. Commentators have pointed out that while both Matthew and Luke focus on spiritual blindness, for Matthew, blindness is a result of religious hypocrisy, while for Luke it's about wealth. And today's parable is a good example of Luke's concern. I'd like to remind you, though, of the larger context of Luke's gospel and that's the theme, which occurs throughout, of REVERSAL. We hear it early in the Gospel when Mary sings the Magnificat – God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. This prayer wouldn't have been strange to the people listening to Jesus, because it was really the same prayer Hannah prayed in the Hebrew Scriptures. But it's hard to hear that prayer when you happen to be standing on the "rich" side – that's where we're standing today and that's where the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus were standing 2000 years ago. Lovers of money, Jesus called them. But I think it's worthwhile to point out that those "lovers of money" had some scripture on their side as well. There are verses in Deuteronomy that promise fertility and prosperity and victory in war to those who obey the Lord and the very first psalm says that God watches over the righteous and

punishes the wicked. So there is a strain in the Bible that equates wealth with God's favor. I should mention here that that strain is still with us. Today it's known as the prosperity Gospel. But there are, as we know, other verses, many of them, who tell us to care for the poor, to open our hands to them, many, in fact, in which God identifies with the poor. So which verses will we listen to? I think that, with this parable, Jesus is pretty clear about the answer to that question.

But again, it's not the fact that the man is rich that is the problem. It's the fact that he's totally unaware of Lazarus at all, let alone the fact that he may have a responsibility towards him. He has those scripture readings to back him up, the ones I just mentioned, the ones that said that suffering was a punishment for sin and that wealth was a reward for righteousness. If we transpose the situation to our time, that argument might still be used, or then again, there's the argument that he must have done something to deserve this, or if he'd just worked harder he wouldn't be in this situation, or he's someone else's responsibility. But then we have Jesus, challenging all those arguments and excuses. In the parable we have a graphic illustration of reversal that I mentioned earlier; now we see Lazarus being cared for by Abraham, and the rich man being tormented. Some commentators point out that the rich man hasn't learned a thing because he's still thinking that Lazarus is somehow lower than him, serving him, bringing him a bit of water. And there are others who concentrate on the great chasm fixed between them which is now unbridgeable. That the situation for the rich man is indeed hopeless. But I think there's another way to read this which is equally legitimate. I think we can argue that the rich man does indeed wake up, he sheds that spiritual blindness and he does so when he thinks about his brothers and asks that someone be sent to them to enlighten them. By doing that, he moves beyond his self-centeredness and shows compassion. And an alternate telling is that he's allowed to go back. He tries to convince his brothers but he fails and slinks back into hell in a state of despair. But the next thing he hears is a great commotion and sees that a band of angels belonging to the Heavenly Corps of Engineers is erecting a pontoon bridge across the chasm separating heaven from hell and as the rich man watches, Lazarus himself

comes across the bridge and embraces him, inviting him to the other side. Fanciful? Perhaps, but I think it reflects what we know about the generous heart of God.

I said at the beginning that these scriptures can be read as markers for our identity. What we place at the center of our lives is a reflection of who we are. It's thought that Paul's letter to Timothy was on the occasion of his baptism. And baptism, as we all know, is our entry into the community of the people of God. In a few weeks, Lou and Stella will be baptized and we'll welcome them into that family. And we'll recite once more those baptismal promises that mark out what it means to be a member of that family – that we belong together, no matter what; that we'll seek and serve Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every human being; that we'll strive for justice and peace. That we're all in this together; that in the Kingdom of God, all are loved and all are one.

Let me close with a story from The Christian Century about a Mennonite pastor who wanted to teach a class in an area prison. When he went the first time, he met the prison chaplain who said, "When you go in there, you've got to know that they aren't like us...they're criminals. They're corrupted." And then the chaplain said, "Before you can go in there, you have to repeat after me, 'THEY ARE NOT LIKE US. Say it: they are not like us!'" And then he insists that it be said again, even louder. The pastor said that he knew that by saying that he was lying, that he was betraying Jesus. He was denying the truth we say in Baptism, that we are all children of the same God, that there is one body and one spirit, one Lord, one faith and one baptism. He says the words the chaplain demands, says them in order to gain entrance to minister to those who are imprisoned. He gags on the lie, but says the words because he sees the ministry as the larger loving thing. He does that ministry and finds love among the inmates. To go back to the Alfie song, the conclusion is that love is what it's all about. I BELIEVE IN LOVE, ALFIE; WITHOUT TRUE LOVE WE JUST EXIST. And that brings us back to Paul – eternal life, real life, true life, what it's all about. It's about more than just existing; it's all about the kind of life we can have when it's a life of love. Amen.

