

Sunday, September 26, 2010
Lectionary 26
Proper 21
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 6:1a, 4–7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6–19
Luke 16:19–31
Year C

I.N.I.

*O God our provider,
teach us to share what you have given us
with each other and those in need.
Open our eyes to see Christ
in all who suffer. Amen*

If you didn't already know it, Jesus talks about money matters more than anything else in the Gospels except for the kingdom of God. Last week we were hit with the warning "you cannot serve God and wealth."

If you didn't already know it, the biblical injunction to remember the poor is easily found in Moses and the prophets.

Moses, delivering the portion of the law about sabbaticals, says in Deuteronomy

¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." (15:11)

The prophet Isaiah says

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (1:16-17)

The prophet Jeremiah says

³Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. (22:3)

The prophet Zechariah says

⁹Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another;
¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (7:9-10)

There was a rich man, Jesus said, and there was a poor man.

The rich man, with many purple silk shirts, had seven-course meals every day, with happily eating on any day of the week imported cheeses, lobster and steak, caviar, champagne, wine, and cognac, chocolate mousse, and tiramisu.

The poor man named Lazarus camped outside the rich man's gated community, and while he was so close, just outside where the rich man lived, his everyday existence was hunger. Instead of fine fashion, he wore sores that attracted dogs to lick the salty sweat.

The contrast between the rich man and poor Lazarus was wide.

In this world, as the story goes, the chasm between rich and poor was not breached, not because the rich man couldn't help. It was because his wealth beckoned to him. It was his possessions that owned him.

In this world, as the story goes, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and blasted old Amos could have railed and screamed all they wanted. But it would have fallen on deaf ears.

What will it take for us to hear the cries of the poor? What will it take for us to recognize the poor so close to us? What if someone came back from the dead to point out God's big tent for those in need?

Last year's poverty rate in the United States rose to 14.3 percent, or 43.6 million people, up from 39.8 people in 2008. Those without health insurance rose to 50.7 million people, and the health overhaul passed by Congress will not take effect until 2014. Some say throw out the politicians. Some say it would have been worse without the Recovery Act.

<http://www.joplinglobe.com/national/x721418997/Recession-cited-as-reason-for-rise-in-poverty-rate-1-in-7-Americans-lives-in-poverty-census-says>

Jesus and the prophets say, "take notice." Do not cling to what you have as a way to live the life God intends, do not make your world so small that only you or a select few live in it, but instead release your grip, open your eyes, for Christ did rise from the dead so that all might have life, and life abundant.

A wise old teacher said Christians pray for the poor because no one else will. The people of Christmas Lutheran Church on the West Bank in Bethlehem say they live with hope because that's all they have, and with 60% unemployment and the majority of the population under the age of eighteen, they refuse to crawl into a corner because they recognize the new life that Jesus gives.

There is an old story of heaven and hell. In hell, the figures are gaunt and gray, sitting around a table spread with a feast not unlike that of the rich man, roast turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, lobster and asparagus, pasta with alfredo sauce, cheesecake. They cannot eat because there are long splints on each arm over the elbows, and they cannot bring the food with or without utensils to their hungry mouths.

In heaven, the same table is spread, and the same splints are affixed to the arms of those there! But the folks there are well-fed, happy, and celebrating. Why? Because instead of becoming stuck either in their affliction or their affluence, they took notice of someone close by and figured out that they could feed one another.

One of the myths of worldwide hunger is that there is not enough food to go around. In reality there is plenty of food, more stockpiles of surplus than in any generation previous. It is the regulations, the distribution processes, and antiquated legislation that inhibit the opportunity to feed one another.

The church takes notice. The ELCA World Hunger Appeal promotes systemic change throughout the globe in its nutrition programs, by its working with indigenous populations to grow native crops that will thrive in its local soil and climate. The ELCA World Hunger Appeal is faithful as it overhead costs low, and provides a long-standing presence in the communities that are served.

Jesus rose from the dead that we might have life. We share bread and wine as a sign of the feast that is to come, for the Lazaruses of this world. We share our resources for economic justice, like fairly traded products, so that our eyes stay open to plight of the poor. Our hands and arms and whole selves are extended to offer peace and salvation on behalf of the one who became poor for our sake.

Listen to Moses and the prophets. Be convinced by one who rose from the dead. God is rich in mercy, and feeds us with grace that is new every morning.

I.N.I.