

September 26, 2010

Pentecost 18/C

## GREED

If I believe my true value is based upon what I have and what I hope to get, I will probably never get enough of whatever it is I want. There is a story about Joseph Heller, the author of Catch 22. He was at a party in the home of a billionaire. Someone pointed to him that his host makes more money in a single day of hedge fund trading than Heller has made from Catch 22. Heller replied, "Yes, but I probably have something he will never have: enough."

How do we know when we have enough? A study by the World Bank Development Research Group indicates that if your annual income is \$34,000.00 you are in the top 5% of a world population of 6 billion people. If your annual income is \$48,000.00 and above, you are in the top 1%. Most of us would probably fall in, near or above that percentile.

Today's lessons are no picnic. All three address money and the consequences of greed. For me, greed comes from the fear that there will never be enough. Greed is inherently self-centered. Having a lot does not seem to be a formula for reducing greed.

As my two siblings and I prepare to divide up some of my mother's things before she downsizes her apartment, I find my worst side rearing its unruly head. Anxiety, jealousy, rivalry, greed, competitiveness, aggression and anger are all there. We really don't need more stuff at our home! Nor have I in any way earned any of it. The "nasty" feelings are hard to admit but dividing up family things can cause serious strain. On the other hand, there is a privilege here that I appreciate.

Legitimate philosophical differences aside, the heated political debate concerning a possible rescission of tax cuts for America's wealthiest is, at least at some level, about personal gain and greed. Greed masks a basic confusion over our true value. If we can "be still and know that thou art God", the anxiety that drives the clamor of greed is quelled and we encounter our true self in God's image.

750 years before Jesus, the prophet Amos recognized that greed is accompanied by absence of conscience and injustice. The rich, whom he excoriates, lie on beds of ivory, drink bowls (not cups) of wine, eat lamb, and listen to minstrels. Music, wine, good food, a king-size bed and leisure by themselves don't seem so nefarious. But what really incenses Amos is that these "loungers" are so seduced by luxurious living that they don't *see* the suffering that is around them and "are not grieved by the ruin of Joseph." "Joseph" stands for the people of Israel, especially of the Northern Kingdom. The "ruin" he speaks of is rampant corruption in religion and politics, the trampling of the poor and the glorification of luxury at the cost of justice. God is eclipsed. It is not difficult to find parallels in history or in our world.

What are we capable of seeing, really seeing? A number of gospel stories show Jesus *seeing* someone in desperate straits, *having compassion* and then *doing* something.

But seeing the suffering of others can be truly painful and hard to bear. We feel helpless or guilty. So, we think, let's turn the channel. We cannot save the world, so why bother even trying to see? But there is solidarity in empathy. Like prayer, empathy is a kind of spiritual action. The Dalai Lama, I presume, sees much of the world's suffering but chooses compassion and joy.

*First Timothy*, today's epistle, was probably written around 125 AD, clearly not by Paul, (who was dead). The author is ostensibly writing to a newly ordained priest named Timothy to counsel him on ways to lead and care for his Christian community. More likely, however, the epistle was intended for the larger audience of an emerging institutional church. The writer offers sound pastoral advice. In today's excerpt he speaks of the dangers of wanting to be rich. Growing up, I had always heard that "Money is the root of all evil." Did that mean even my 25-cent allowance? But what the writer *actually* says is that "the *love* of money is *a* root of all kinds of evil." In other words, money itself does not cause evil. In fact, as we know, money can do much good in our neighborhood and in the world. The 26-year-old CEO of Face Book, Mark Zuckerberg, has recently given the City of Newark 100 million dollars to improve public education in that beleaguered city. Small gifts can also do much good and advance economic justice. Micro-financing is an example of how a really small amount of money can dramatically improve lives.

In the closing section of the epistle, the writer gives advice to the rich.

"They are to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may *take hold of the life that is really life.*" What is "the life that is really life?" It involves what Dan Matthews last Sunday called the "privilege of giving". Generosity of heart and substance are universal and democratic, the privilege of the rich and not-so-rich.

Now the intriguing parable of the rich man and Lazarus! I know of no other story in the gospels like this one. It appears to have Egyptian roots while also framing its message in the Greek mythological understanding of the after-life, or Hades. The significance of this story of reversal is really about *this* life not the afterlife. It is about seeing and not seeing. In the first part of the story there is a rich man who consumes much but who is spiritually consumed by his pursuit of pleasure. He cannot see Lazarus, the poor, sick beggar on his doorstep who would settle for the scraps that fall from his table. His life is misery but the rich man never sees him, chooses not to see him. In a different way, I imagine the life of the rich man is miserable also.

The rich man has dogs as guard animals. They are fed. Lazarus goes hungry. At first glance, the dogs licking Lazarus' sores it seems like one more humiliation for him. But it was believed that the saliva of a dog had healing properties. Saliva is sterile. Archeologists in Ashkelon, Israel have recently discovered a dog cemetery with the remains of 1300 canines buried in individual plots. Some think that the site was a Phoenician healing center where the sick went, paid money and trained dogs would lick their wounds.

In the parable, the guard dogs of the rich man realize that Lazarus is their friend and lick his sores. In this way, they do much more for him than the rich man. Even the dogs see, have compassion and do something.

In Hades, the fortunes of the rich man and the poor man are reversed. The former is in a fiery hell. Lazarus, whose name means “God helps”, is close to the bosom of father Abraham. He was carried to this place of honor and comfort by angels. An unbridgeable chasm separates the rich man from Lazarus and Abraham. Heaven and Hell. Chasms in relationships can be hellacious in this life.

Jesus’ audience believed that wealth was a sign of godliness and righteousness. Poverty was thought to be the consequence of sinfulness. These attitudes persist even today. Imagine the shock and surprise of the Pharisees upon hearing that the rich man is in torment in Hades.

The story cleverly brings the listener back to the present. When the formerly rich man implores Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers, Abraham tells him that his brothers have all they need with the teachings of Moses and the prophets. It is all there. But the former rich man insists, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He seems to have a good point here, but there is a zinger for us when we examine our own reservations about what it means to consider Jesus rising from the dead. Are we that dissimilar from the rich man’s brothers? Is our vision of the world’s suffering and beauty clearer because of the resurrection?

We have all we need, we have all we need ...

in front of us and within us;

What do we see?

### **Luke 16:19-31**

<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. <sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ <sup>25</sup>But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup>Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ <sup>27</sup>He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ <sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ <sup>30</sup>He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ <sup>31</sup>He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”