

## Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Sept. 29, 2013

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### **It is none of my business!**

The phrase 'It's none of my business' can have more than one meaning. It can be an acknowledgment that we must respect the right of others to self-determination and personal privacy. Or it can serve as an excuse for not stepping in to help when it is clear that another needs our help. The phrase has almost become a motto for a society in which individuals are so totally absorbed in their own life projects that they fail to consider the common good.

Other biblical sayings suggest the tension between self-interest and communal concern. One from the Old Testament and another from the New Testament show that this tension is longstanding. The first is well known to most people: "Am I my brother's [or sister's] keeper?" This question was asked by Cain when God inquired regarding the whereabouts of his brother Abel (Gen 4:9). It is not unlike the question put to Jesus by the scholar of the law: "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). These questions, or questions like them, have resounded down through the centuries, for they raise an issue that women and men of every generation and in every social situation must address: 'To what extent am I responsible for the wellbeing of others?' We know from reading these two biblical stories that those who asked the questions were not sincere; Cain's response was a subterfuge, and the scholar's query was intended to test Jesus' knowledge of the Law. However, the real question still plagues us: 'To what extent am I responsible for the wellbeing of others?'

The story in today's gospel does not answer the question for us. However, it does demonstrate the underside of the answer. It portrays two men, one wealthy, the other destitute. The affluence of the first man is seen in his manner of dress, in the style of his home, and in the quality of the table that he spreads for himself. By contrast, the poor man, whose name Lazarus, is the Greek form of Eliezer (which means my God

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helps), is destitute. He lies begging at the gate of the home of the rich man, hoping for crumbs from his table. His condition is so debased that the scavenging dogs lick his sores. The characterizations are exaggerated in order to make a point.

The story is not simply a contrast between the wealthy and the poor. And though the poor man eventually is comforted in ‘the bosom of Abraham’ and the wealthy man agonizes in the netherworld, reward or punishment is not determined by the men’s respective economic states. Then what is the point that Jesus is making by telling this story? The answer is found in the meaning of covenant responsibility. Both men belong to ‘the people of Israel’: the poor man enjoys the embrace of Abraham; the rich man is told that his brothers have Moses and the prophets, a reference to the religious traditions of the Israelites. This means that they are bonded to each other through membership in the covenant community; they have responsibilities toward each other, particularly the rich man toward the poor man. The story shows that the rich man ignored these responsibilities. It was his business; he was indeed his brother’s keeper; he should have been a neighbor to the poor man – but he failed!

Why should this man have known better? Because such covenant identity and mutual responsibility is at the heart of the teaching of Moses (the Law) and the prophets. The Book of Deuteronomy insists that ideally “there should be no one of you in need” (15:4). However, there were poor and needy people, and so they were to be cared for. Their debts were to be periodically forgiven (15:1); part of the harvest was to be left for them (24:19-21). Amos’ condemnation of the complacent well-to-do of his day fits the disinterested man in the gospel. The rich man should have known this; and knowing this, he should have acted on it.

This is a very challenging scenario to consider, particularly for those of us who are part of a society that so highly cherishes individual opportunity and advancement. This is not to say that wealthy people are not generous. They are often known for their philanthropy or charity. However, attending to the needs of covenant partners is a matter of justice, not charity. Biblical covenant is a communal concept. It emerges from a society that believes in mutual responsibility. It presumes that, while people do have rights, they carry these rights as members of the group, not merely as detached individuals. Furthermore, these rights flow from relationships with one another as well as from a relationship with God. It is for this reason that social justice was such a fundamental concern of the prophets in ancient Israel.

This reading is held up before us today so that we may reflect on whether or not our sense of covenant responsibility is deeper and more sincere than the rich man depicted in the story. To what extent have we even been aware of our covenant bond with others? Have we so taken on our society's sense of individualism that we have forgotten what it means to be 'the body of Christ,' And conscious of the bond that binds us to others, how faithfully have we carried out our covenant responsibilities? The rich man was not accused of sins of commission, infractions of the law. There is no mention of his acquiring his wealth through fraudulent means. Rather, he was guilty of sins of omission, sins born of disinterest toward others and a disregard of covenant commitment. The reading challenges us to discover how we measure up in this regard.

Lazarus represents the poor in our midst, those with physical ailments, repugnant as they might be, who are too often judged to be 'none of my business.' The fate of the rich man tells us that the wellbeing of others is our business. As members of 'the body of Christ' we have covenant responsibility for them. But how are we today to meet these responsibilities? The complexity of our society does not invite simple solutions. However, we cannot remain complacent in the face of such widespread human need today, whether economic, medical, or both. The first and perhaps the most difficult step we must take is the move toward a change of heart, a *metánoia* like that which the rich man wished for his brothers. He wanted them to be awakened to their responsibility of the needy in their midst. The comparable challenge that we face today is not merely a social or political one; it is a religious one. Gandhi, Churchill, and Truman have all said that a society will be judged by the way it treats its weakest members. Our biblical tradition – both Testaments – maintains that kindhearted treatment is not a matter of charity, but one of justice. It is our business.