

Twenty-six Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 25, 2016

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“THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS”

Sometimes the Good News is not comfortable. Sometimes the Good News forces us to confront what is not good in our lives and calls us to conversion. Nowhere is that better seen than in today’s Scripture readings that call into question our lives of comfort. We expect the fiery prophet Amos to call his people to task – to condemn their self-satisfaction and complacency – as they luxuriate in the comforts they are able to enjoy because they have cheated the poor!

Yet in today’s Gospel, Jesus seems to go Amos one better. If we look closely at the parable we heard today, we notice that the rich man did not make his money on the back of Lazarus – he did not cheat him or defraud him in any way. In fact, the rich man did not even notice Lazarus. He did not see him – at least not until he needed something that he thought Lazarus could give him.

This seems to be the sin of the rich man – that he did not see the poor man at his gate. He was so focused on his own life and wealth and comfort that he simply didn’t see. The Gospel is not necessarily against wealth and comfort, but it asks whether our being comfortable can cause us to become complacent, or narrow our vision. The Gospel thus challenges us to expand our comfort zone to include those whom we usually don’t see.

This reading of the Gospel gets me nervous. In what ways is my life so comfortable that I am no longer able to see my sisters and brothers at the gate who are in need? Who are the people in my life that I simply don’t see? My fear is that the list may be a lot longer than I would like to admit. I could start with homeless people, people a lot like Lazarus. They seem to be everywhere, sitting on sidewalks with signs in front of them asking for money so that they can eat, or standing at intersections begging from persons in their cars. They make me feel uncomfortable – should I give them money? What will they do with it if I do give them something? Their very presence makes me feel uncomfortable. It’s easier to pretend not to notice, to look the other way, to keep walking or driving, to pretend I just don’t see them.

There are others, even closer to me, whom I might not really see. There are older friends or relatives who may be home-bound or in nursing homes. I promise myself –

and them – that I will visit them. But the place where they live makes me feel uncomfortable. Their home may not be as clean as it should be, and I wonder if I should say something. I feel uncomfortable. Or the nursing home depresses me. Or my friend might be in the beginning stages of dementia, and our conversation makes me feel uncomfortable. My friend seems now only to sit in a wheel chair or talk about the old days – or no longer talks at all. I begin to visit less and less. I no longer see my friend.

Or perhaps I find out that a close friend or relative has been diagnosed with cancer and has only a few months to live. Again, I remember her as a dynamic, active person – so full of life. Seeing her in her present deteriorating state makes me feel uncomfortable. If I could fix it, I would do something. But there is nothing I can do, so I visit my friend less and less. I stop seeing her.

In each of these situations, it's not that I'm acting out of bad will. Rather, I don't feel comfortable, and in my discomfort I make the decision to back away. I no longer see my sister or brother at the gate in need, and I back away.

And yet, the point of today's Scripture readings is to invite us not to back away, but rather, to see, to notice! They confront us to acknowledge that our discomfort is simply that – being uncomfortable. They ask whether we have become so secure and comfortable in the circumstances of our lives that we no longer have any desire to venture out from what is comfortable for us and to live the life that God calls us to. They challenge us to see in new ways.

Today's readings challenge us to move beyond what is comfortable and to become people of greater faith. The letter to Timothy puts it succinctly: "Pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness." These virtues do not speak primarily of our relationship with God, but rather, our relationships with our sisters and brothers. And if we do not take these relationships seriously and refuse to see our brothers and sisters who languish at our gate, we are no better than the rich man in today's Gospel.

We will soon be coming to the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, and as we're confronted with today's readings it might be good to remember that the Latin word that we translate as "mercy" literally means "to have a heart for those in misery." If we are to be the people of faith that the letter to Timothy talks about, we need to go out to those in need – especially when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable. We need to hear the words at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was sick and you visited me. ... As long as you did it to one of these least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

The Gospel challenge may seem to demand too much, but the first step is simply to see! Sometimes all that is necessarily is a smile at a homeless person, acknowledging



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that he is a person of dignity, no matter what his circumstances. Perhaps what our elderly and sick relatives and friends need is simply our being there, holding their hand. If we feel uncomfortable trying to make conversation, perhaps we don't need to say anything at all.

To develop a heart for those in misery, to begin to embody the works of mercy, the first step is simply to see – to see the homeless, the poor, the marginalized, the elderly, the sick, as our sisters and brothers. And as we move from our comfort zones we begin to see in them the very presence of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.