

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 26  
September 30, 2007

Amos 6:1a, 4-7  
Psalm 146  
1 Timothy 6:6-19  
Luke 16:19-31

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ.

Every January, a special section in *Life Magazine* reminds us of all of the rich and famous people who have died the previous year. Most of you have also probably seen the television show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

We seem to have this fascination with people who are extremely wealthy or popular. Some people will do almost anything just to get autographs of the rich and famous. I always thought that autographs were a rather curious thing.

What do you do with them? What kind of gratification do you get by looking at some name scribbled on a napkin or scrap piece of paper? You look at it for a while and then stick it in a drawer. Once in a while you might bring it out to impress your friends.

But then there are those who use autographs for investment purposes. Some names can fetch millions of dollars from collectors. For centuries, the mere names of rich and famous people have been sought after and cherished.

Some time ago, there was a television interview with former president Jimmy Carter. He was explaining how he had become involved with Habitat for Humanity. He said he had long been a member of a church made up of people who sincerely cared about helping the poor. They were always involved in projects that helped the needy.

One project took place every year at Thanksgiving. They would collect money to provide a special Thanksgiving dinner for the poor. And every year they would have to ask a social service agency to provide them with the name of a poor person or family.

Why? Because no member of the church actually knew anyone who was poor. President Carter pointed out how the irony of this situation suddenly struck him. The members of the church cared about the poor, but no one in the church knew anyone who was poor by name. For certain, no one had an autograph of a poor person.

I would guess that would be the same for you and me. I can give you the names of many rich and famous people. But I cannot give you the name of one person that I know who is poor. I mean really poor, not those living on a minimal fixed income. I'm talking

about people who have no home, or those who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

In the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel, the rich man has no name, but the poor man does. This is certainly odd, isn't it? Both then and now, it is the rich who are identified by name, and the poor who are lumped together in a nameless mass of humanity.

From the very beginning of this parable, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that in the Kingdom of God, the world has been turned upside down. In God's Kingdom, the poor have names because they too are created in the image of God. They too are loved by God.

Therefore, Jesus goes as far as to name the poor person in the parable. Of all of Jesus' parables, this is the only one where he attaches a name to one of the characters. He calls the poor man Lazarus. Now this is significant in itself. For the name Lazarus means; "God is my helper."

You see, it is no coincidence that Jesus calls this man Lazarus. It not only implies that this man believed and trusted in God, but it also implies that God is the one who eventually came to his aid.

As Jesus continues the parable, the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus deepens. The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen. Purple was a symbol of wealth. Lazarus is covered with open sores. For all we know he was naked.

We are told that the dogs would come and lick his sores. Now these were not cute little puppies who felt sorry for him and were trying to help. These were wild, half-crazed street dogs who were just as starved as Lazarus. They were licking him, waiting for him to die, so they could devour what little flesh was left on his bones.

On the other hand, just a short distance away, the rich man feasted sumptuously every day. Lazarus longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. It sounds as though Lazarus would have liked to eat the crumbs that fell from the table. But listen to this. The translation here is misleading. For this is not the case.

You see, in those days, rich people used bread the way we use napkins. The bread was thin and soft, perhaps like a flour tortilla. They would wipe their mouths and hands and sometimes even their noses on the bread, and then they tossed it under the table. This is the bread Lazarus was longing for.

So as the story goes, the rich man dies and is buried. There was probably an extravagant funeral service held in his honor. In Rio De Janeiro, Brazil there is great wealth, and also immense poverty. I once heard that some wealthy people would have caskets designed with built in stereo systems, so that their favorite music can be played for their eternal bliss.

I would guess that the rich man in the parable had quite the tomb. Lazarus on the other hand was not buried. Rather, he is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

As the parable continues, we are told that the rich man ends up in Hades where he is being tormented. The interesting thing is that he can see Abraham and Lazarus. He cries out to Abraham to send Lazarus to help relieve the suffering. Now the shoe is on the other foot.

During his life on earth he showed no mercy to Lazarus, yet now he wants Lazarus to come to his aid. The rich man still doesn't get it. He thinks of Lazarus as little more than an errand boy who can be bossed around by his superiors.

He then requests that Lazarus go and warn the five brothers of the rich man of the torments of Hell. The rich man still does not care about the poor, but only about the rich members of his own family.

We must be careful at this point not to misunderstand the parable. Many people have been taught for centuries that this parable is a condemnation of the rich for being rich.

That is not what Jesus is implying. The rich man does not end up in torment because he is rich. He is there because of his indifferent and uncaring attitude toward poor Lazarus.

The Bible contains many stories of rich people who were faithful to God. Within the past 50 years, archeologists have found evidence that indicates that Abraham himself was probably the wealthiest person in all of Holy Scripture.

In the parable Jesus told, Abraham is not in torment, but in paradise. If wealth automatically condemns, then Abraham would have been in torment with the rich man in this story.

To condemn the rich just for being rich is to commit the same sin that the rich man in the parable committed. It is to lump people together as a nameless mass of humanity and then discount them as unimportant.

The temptation to generalize about the wealthy is no better than generalizing about the poor. For the wealthy have names, and so do the poor.

They are all persons created in the image of God. And Jesus died for both the rich and the poor. It is in our baptisms we are ALL named and claimed. It is what happens at the font that becomes the great equalizer. And that is the good news.

But this good news also requires responsibility. The rich man in the parable did not live up to his responsibility. His responsibility as one who had been given such wealth was to share it with others. It has been said that there is no one lonelier in the world than the person who has much to give but no one to give it to.

As all of you know by now, we have joined together in a Faith Venture as we move forward with building a new worship space and transforming our current space into education space. This will give us the capability to further reach out into our community for the sake of the Gospel.

However, one thing must be clear. What we are doing is not primarily for us. It is not solely for the benefit of the club members. It will only be successful if it becomes a mission outpost for the Lazarus' of this world. It must serve as a vehicle for serving others.

Archbishop William Temple once said: "The Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members."

And sometimes we get so caught up in our own lives – what is best for us, that we lose our focus. We forget who God has called us to be. We lose sight of what is really going on around us in our communities and in the world.

A young and successful executive was traveling down a road in a poor, run-downed neighborhood going a bit too fast in his new Porsche. He suddenly saw something that looked like a kid darting out from between parked cars. So he slowed down not wanting to hit anyone.

As his car passed one set of the parked cars, a brick smashed into the side of his Porsche! He slammed on the brakes and backed up to the spot where the brick had been thrown from.

Filled with anger, he jumped out of the car, grabbed the nearest kid and pushed him up against a parked car shouting, "What was this all about and who are you? Just what do you think you are doing? That's a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost me a lot of money. Why did you do it?"

The young boy was frightened and apologetic. He said, "I'm sorry mister, but I didn't know what else to do. I threw the brick because no one would stop." With tears running down his face, the child pointed to a spot just on the other side of street.

"It's my brother," he said. "He accidentally rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I think that he's hurt bad. I can't lift him up. Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Moved beyond words, the driver tried to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. He ran over to the boy's brother and hurriedly lifted the handicapped boy back into the wheelchair. He then took out a linen handkerchief and dabbed at the fresh scrapes and cuts.

A quick look told him that everything was going to be okay. "Thank you and may God bless you," the grateful child told the stranger. Too shaken up for words, the man simply

watched the boy push his wheelchair-bound brother down the road and into the impoverished neighborhood.

It was a long, slow walk back to the Porsche. The damage was very noticeable, but the driver never bothered to repair the dented side door. He kept the dent there to remind him of this message; “Don’t go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention!”

I think that sometimes God whispers in our souls and speaks to our hearts. Sometimes when we don’t have time to listen, God has to throw a brick at us. In Jesus’ story today, God was trying to get the attention of the rich man. He threw a brick at him everyday. That brick’s name was Lazarus.

The bricks from God that come flying our way are not meant to do us harm. They are not meant to condemn us. Rather, they are thrown to help us experience the joy of giving – the joy of sharing. They help us to understand what the Kingdom of God is really like.

The rich man never got to experience this joy. He never was able to identify with the poor as human beings who were loved by God – people who had real names. He never got to know Lazarus as a brother created in the image of God. He never was able to realize that with his great wealth came great responsibility.

And this is a message for you and me today. Being rich does not automatically make us condemned by God, but rather being rich provides us with opportunities to serve God.

It also allows us to serve our neighbor who does indeed have a name. And when this happens, God smiles and says, “well done good and faithful servant.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

#### CHILDREN'S SERMON

What does it mean to be really really poor?

Do any of you know anyone who is like that?

How many of you want to be poor someday?

What does it mean to be rich?

How many of you want to be rich someday?

Why do you want to be rich?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells a story about a very rich man and a very poor man. The rich man was very greedy.

Do you know what greedy means?

The poor man had nothing. No food, no clothes, no place to live, and no one to help him. The rich man saw him but didn't even help.

Then both of them died. The poor man went to heaven to be with God and the rich man went to a terrible place where there was a lot of suffering.

Why do you think that happened?

The rich man was very greedy and didn't care about the poor man. He didn't want to share.

How many of you know how to share?

That is what God is calling us to do in this story. Whatever we have is what God has given to us. If we have a lot and someone else doesn't have anything, God wants us to share. That would make God very happy.

Let us pray.....