

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 21
Year C

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

It has been said that the two greatest downfalls for many are sex and money. Looking at some of the disciplinary actions taken against clergy across denominations in the past few decades bear this out. However, looking at the readings we have from the New Testament today, this is not a new phenomenon. It is probably safe to say that these two topics have been prominent in all human societies forever.

Today's readings focus on just one of these issues - money. Throughout Luke's writings, finances have been a major theme. In the Magnificat, the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, in the sermon on the Plain, and several parables, we see the issue of money. The Acts of the Apostles contains stories of communal holding of all property and the common sharing of everything. In Paul's Letter to Timothy, we also see the issue arise. What was going on that made this issue so important?

In the Letter to Timothy, prior to this passage, Paul talks about preachers and teachers using their gifts for financial gain. While it is true that there is much to be gained from following Jesus, it is not in a materialistic form. We should not expect to get rich, just because we are Christians. However, that was the goal of some in the first century and that is what Paul is addressing here. We should be content with having our needs for food and clothing supplied. Those who seek riches have their priorities wrong. Thus, Paul makes the famous statement about the love of money.

The Gospel story is similar. We hear about a wealthy man, possibly of royal stature, feasting and living the life of leisure. At the gate of his home sits a beggar, the only person ever given a name in any of Jesus' parables. There is never any inclination that the rich man did anything harmful to the beggar; he just didn't take any notice of him. We might be guilty of the same offense when we drive by beggars at the street corner or, as happens in large cities, step over a homeless person asleep on the sidewalk. There is no maliciousness intended. But, there could be no greater contrast in the lot of these two men.

It is only in death that things change. The beggar is carried by angels into the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man ends up in the place of all dead. That he is being tormented by flames gives rise to our concept of hell, although that was not a first century thought. In spite of his new situation, the rich man has not changed. He never addresses the beggar, only Abraham. And in that, he still feels that the beggar should do his bidding, even to the point that the rich man asks Abraham to send this poor beggar to plead with his brothers. What are we to make of all this?

In both readings, an appeal is made to our priorities. How do we view money and how do we interact with those who may be in need? Obviously, from the story in Luke's Gospel, it is abundantly clear that our actions in this life have eternal consequences. We need to examine our relationship with money - how we prioritize it in our lives. Are we like the rich man who is so comfortable that he doesn't even notice those in need? Do we hold wealth as an ideal?

It is important to note the ending of the passage from Paul's Letter to Timothy. While we should not make wealth our goal in life, being rich is not a sin. How we use our wealth is what matters. When money becomes our fascination, our focus in life, we are in trouble. But when we use all of our resources - time, treasure, and talent - for the work of God, we do well. As Paul says in conclusion, "so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." That is our goal.