

Amos 6:1-4, 6-7

Psalm 46:6, 7-8, 9, 10 R: God faithfully watches over all.

Acts 16:11-15

Luke 16:19-31

**Material Possessions:
From Guilt to Gratitude and Generosity by Grace
October 14, 2007 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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A key theme in the gospel we call Luke, which recurs throughout the gospel, is the theme of material possessions. Unlike Matthew, who focuses on the "poor in spirit", Luke's emphasis is on the wealth in relation to the materially poor. As Nancy indicated, many scholars believe that the anonymous author of this gospel lived in an urban setting and infer that there were rich people in Luke's church, as well as some poor. It was not uncommon for the early church to bring together as equals people who were otherwise separated for life by social class.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke explores this issue. In just a few words, the rich man is contrasted vividly with Lazarus. The rich man was very rich: He dressed in purple, the most valued and costly of dyed cloths, and fine linen. He feasted sumptuously every day. Lazarus longed for scraps from the rich man's table. He was covered with the sores that were apparently open because the dogs came to lick his wounds. The dogs treated Lazarus better than the rich man. Yet, the rich man must have passed Lazarus daily. Lazarus sat outside his gated home.

In the parable, Lazarus died and was carried away by the angels to be with Sarah and Abraham. When the rich man died, he went to Hades, where he was tormented, and from where he saw Lazarus with Abraham and Sarah.

Even in death and torment, the rich man has an attitude. When he sees Lazarus, he sees someone to tend to his needs. He asks first that Lazarus bring him water and then that Lazarus be sent to his parent's house to warn his siblings, presumably from the consequences of their lifestyles.

Like the rich man, we learn that a chasm has been fixed between the two that cannot be crossed. The rich man had good things in life, and Lazarus evil things. Now, their situations are reversed: Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is in agony. We also learn that the warning the rich man wants delivered to his 5 siblings is already in Moses and the prophets. One need only listen. Not even someone raised from the dead will convince someone to repent who does not hear Moses and the prophets.

But of what should they repent? The prophet Amos provides a glimpse. Amos preached around 750 BCE, long after David's united monarchy was divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north; Judah in the south. He preached, at most, 25 years before Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians. Only afterwards, his efforts to call the Israelites to repentance seemed divinely inspired predictions of their doom. He was right, everyone concluded. Amos tried to protect Israel from the fate of neighboring city states, like Halmeh, Gath, and Calneh. Amos criticized the Israelites, especially their leaders, for many things. In the passage we read today, he criticized them for luxurious lifestyles and inflated self-importance. Their leaders considered themselves distinguished; but, instead of putting off a reign of terror, their actions hastened it. Meanwhile, they indulged themselves, lying on beds of ivory or reclining on couches, dining on lamb and veal, listening to and playing the harp, going to the spa [anointing themselves in the finest oils], drinking wine from bowls and ignoring the ruin of Jacob [another name for Israel].

For me, the words of Luke and Amos provoke powerful guilt. They remind of Jesus' saying: It's hard for a rich person to enter the reign of God. In the U.S., I'm not rich, but on a worldwide scale, I'm probably among 5% of the world's wealthiest people. I dress well and eat well [if not luxuriously], throw out leftovers, indulge in wine weekly, eat out often, and sometimes feel I "deserve" a treat of some kind, or my job [after all, I'm well educated], or a certain kind of treatment from others who have less than I. Some of the homeless people downtown scare me. And if I give them money, will they buy drugs or alcohol? I'm simply not constitutionally capable of "selling everything that I have" and giving it to the poor. What will that accomplish, I ask myself? Add to the number of the poor? What about my family who doesn't share my interpretation of gospel demands? What about the ways that my "wealth", limited as it is, contributes to the economy and the employment of others, and ensures that my children will be self-supporting, contributing members of society?

Perhaps there is a hint of resolution in the story of Lydia. She was a seller, not a wearer, of purple cloth. She made her money providing a service to the wealthy. She must have been somewhat like us because she wasn't poor. She had a home, and a household that apparently included servants because her baptism resulted in their baptism too. But "she opened her heart" to the gospel Paul preached. A sign of her conversion was her invitation to Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Paul didn't ask Lydia to divest of her wealth; but what she had, she shared.

Neither Luke nor Amos condemn wealth itself. What each condemns is luxurious living without regard to its impact on others, especially if one is a leader, responsible for the state of the community. Both decry wealth accompanied by complacency, attitudes of entitlement, self-indulgence and unwillingness to consider the needs of others. Both suggest that this combination creates a chasm between the rich and the Holy which cannot be crossed after death. It's in this life that we have, by God's grace, the opportunity to overcome beliefs in entitlement, and the possibility of moving to a posture of gratitude, from which generosity spontaneously flows, a generosity that extends beyond, and includes others than our loved ones.

Therein lies the message and the hope. We can, with God's grace, come to grasp that "God watches faithfully over all", even those we ignore, deride, dismiss, or condemn, and that our call is to do the same, to watch faithfully over all. This understanding of God's care for us awakens in us gratitude that erupts in generosity, even generosity as extravagant as God's.

Our country, like Israel at the time of Amos, may be trembling on the brink of destruction. We have Moses and the prophets and one who is raised from the dead summoning us to hear them. Let us ask God for the grace to hear them, the capacity for our hearing to transform us from paralyzing guilt to profound gratitude and spontaneous generosity. We may not be able to forestall the collapse of our culture, but we can try. And, who knows? Maybe God's grace and our efforts can redeem the future.