

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC    September 29, 2019**  
**26th Sunday of Year C    Amos 6:1a-4-7, Luke 16:19-31**

Some years ago when I was serving in a parish in the town of Brewster up in Putnam County, I came across a story in the local newspaper about a developer who wanted to build a 150-stall condominium for polo ponies. As you may know, the nearby area in northern Westchester is "horse country." He probably figured that there was a ready market for his idea. The headline of the article read "Classy Condos for Pricey Ponies," and went on to describe what the developer called "European style" stalls, crafted with wrought-iron and "select woods," with each stall having a 12'-by-16' patio, all at a rather exorbitant sum. I have nothing against polo, the sport of kings, but given the poverty and homelessness, then and now, in our society, in fact in our world, I think only a "talking" horse like "Mr. Ed," whom some of you may remember from the early days of TV, should rate such palatial quarters. And the last time I saw him in re-runs on cable TV, he seemed quite content with much humbler digs. No doubt, some will say that people have the right to spend their money on whatever foolishness they wish, whether it be a mausoleum for their cat or a mink cat for their dog. Certainly they have the right, but in light of today's readings, is it really "right?"

In today's reading from the prophet Amos, we hear "They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oils; yet they are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph." Now who is "Joseph?" "Joseph" refers to the other area where the Jews lived. At that time Israel was divided into two kingdoms, "Joseph" to the north and "Judah" or Judea to the south. So, Amos is criticizing those Jews in the south who are indifferent to the hardships their fellow Jews in the north are suffering, after have been laid waste by an invading army. Their neighbors starve, while they have more than enough. A parallel can be found in our society in the polarization that exists between those who have bounced back, even flourished, after the financial crisis of 2008 and those who have lost everything, between those who live in comfort and those who are only a hospital bill or a major car repair away from bankruptcy. It is not wealth "per se" that is being criticized in today's readings, but the indifference, the callousness of the "haves" toward the "have-nots."

The parable we hear Jesus speak continues this theme of opposites. It is a study in contrasts between an unnamed rich man and a poor man, named Lazarus. The rich man is unnamed, because we are challenged to reflect whether his behavior matches our own. That is why this parable can be so disturbing. We hear how the rich man is dressed in purple garments and fine linen, while Lazarus is covered with sores. Purple clothing was mad with a very expensive dye; it was usually the color of nobility. Today

we might think of high fashion—Prada, Versace, Armani, Hugo Boss. Fine linen was an imported fabric, usually from Egypt. Imagine today 1000 thread count sheets. Lazarus instead is covered with sores. For the Jews any kind of skin disease rendered a person untouchable, to be kept at a distance. Jesus goes on to say, “Dogs even came to lick his sores.” Isn’t that nice?—Wrong! The dogs that roamed the streets of a typical Jewish town weren’t the well-groomed, obedience school-trained, fine-pedigreed pooches that we are accustomed to see in this neighborhood. They were essentially scavengers, looking for food wherever they could find it, living off garbage. Jesus is implying that this poor man is reduced to living as “human garbage.” Another contrast, “the rich man dined sumptuously each day,” while Lazarus didn’t even have the scraps that fell from his table. How could the rich man not have noticed Lazarus? He was lying at the rich man’s door. The rich man may have had to walk around Lazarus or step over him when he left his home, maybe even when he left to go to the synagogue to thank God for his wealth. The rich man could have missed “seeing” Lazarus, if was living within a bubble of self-absorption and indifference.

Death, of course, is the great equalizer, and in death the tables are turned. The rich man is in torment, while Lazarus, who previously was “untouchable,” now rests in the bosom of Abraham. In life the rich man and Lazarus were only a short distance apart. Now they are separated by a great chasm. But some things never change. Here is this wealthy guy in a place of torment, and still he is giving orders, as no doubt he was used to doing during his lifetime. You know the type—the sort that is used to giving orders all the time and having “underlings” snap to attention. He says, “Yo, Father Abraham, let me warn my brothers, so that they don’t end up here.” Abraham says that they, that we, have enough warnings, ironically, even from one who has returned from the dead.

All the parables invite us to reflect on our behavior and then to act. So, what are we to do? I can’t say specifically, but each of us is called to do something, insofar as we are able to alleviate the poverty we see all around us. Some may set apart a certain number of quarters or singles to give to beggars in the street; other may donate to foundations and organizations that help the poor; others may volunteer their time in service programs trying to alleviate homeless, poverty, inadequate housing. Those who are living on the streets probably got there as a result of drug addiction, mental illness or a severe financial setback—most likely some combination of all three. As Christians, it is not our role to theorize, correctly or more likely, incorrectly, how they got there, but to do what we can to help.

The parable says that Lazarus was living at the rich man’s door. Our world has shrunk, so there are those who may live far away but upon whose lives, nonetheless,

we have a real impact, and thus a responsibility. It is not just a matter of justice or charity, but enlightened self-interest. In the Middle East it was a severe drought in Syria that caused people living in villages to move to the cities, and when the government did little to help them, a civil war erupted that led to mass migration to Europe, and to political instability and the rise of illiberal democracies there, i.e., democracies or majority rule that do not respect the role of minorities. Now, closer to home a drought in Guatemala led people to migrate to the north to find the means to live. That, and other factors, have led to the crisis we now have at our southern border. Climate change is the factor in both of these situations. As a nation, except perhaps for China, we are the greatest consumers of energy and the greatest polluters of the planet.

Reread that section from Amos, today's first reading, and see how appropriately it refers to our generation as well. Separating recyclables from non-recyclables is well-intentioned, but it is not going to make much of a difference. Only a massive restructuring of our wasteful and polluting practices is going to save us from the inevitable. Some may be opposed to this because they are opposed to "big-government." But we have "big-government" for national defense, so why not for this? Isn't climate change an imminent danger? Some will say that if we make those suggested changes, our whole way of life will have to change. That's true, and there is no getting around it. It won't be easy. Still that was the same argument that was made in the South for preserving slavery—that the South could not exist economically without slaves. It took the conflagration of a Civil War to resolve that situation. Pray God, we can find a better solution for climate change.

The parables of Jesus invite us to reflect and to act, to do something. Jesus said, "A cup of cold water given in my name is given to me." Let us pray that we can act responsibly and generously to respond to the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves, so that what is left blank in the parable, viz., the name of the rich man is not filled in with our own.