

## **26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Immaculate Conception School**

September 29, 2019    Immaculate Conception Parish, Three Rivers    11:00 a.m.

I am so glad to be here with you today for this very important moment in the life of this Parish Family as we give thanks for the blessing your Parish School has been, and continues to be. I want to thank Fr. Mathias, Fr. Antony, your immediate predecessor who is here with us, Mrs. Margaret Erich, our Superintendent of Catholic Schools; I also want to acknowledge Sharon Voege, the Principal of this parish school, the teachers, staff and students here present. I also ask all alumni of the school here present to stand to be acknowledged as well. All families, friends of the School, and parishioners---All of us, sisters and brothers in Christ!

It's hard to believe that it's the end of September already, isn't it? We're gathered here on the last Sunday of this month, which is also the first Sunday of Fall, and I'm sure we're all wondering: "Where did September go"?! This is the time of year when all kinds of things are taking place to compete for our attention: baseball season winding down, football season in the 4<sup>th</sup> week already, and so many other activities of every sort.

But today, we are focused on this special celebration here in the life of Immaculate Conception Parish, as we celebrate 70 years that the Parish School has been educating, and helping to form, the "next generation", in mind, body and spirit for more than three generations. Anyone here from the first graduating class?

With all of that as a context, what most importantly brings us together as God's holy People is our weekly obligation to give praise and thanks to God, and we do so on this, the 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. God's Word always speaks to our hearts; sometimes it comforts us, and at other times, it can cut like a sharp, two-edged sword. It seems to me that today's Readings are more sharp than soothing.

Both the First Reading from the Prophet Amos and the Gospel Reading from St. Luke deal with the "sin" of complacency----the act of doing nothing, or feeling nothing, in the face of other people's extreme needs and great misery.

We heard Amos, speaking in the Name of the “*Lord, the God of hosts*”, say very clearly: “*Woe to the complacent in Zion!*” He goes on to condemn the “*have’s*” for making life burdensome, and even dangerous, for the “*have-not’s*”. Amos is addressing the basic human problem, as old as humanity, of justice and injustice within the human family. This is not an easy subject to address; in fact, it may be the most challenging of all. In Amos’ description of the “*complacent*”, those people weren’t actually being mean, violent, or directly hurtful to others; they simply were self-absorbed, concerned only about their own comfort pleasures: “*lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, ....drinking wine from bowls, and anointing themselves with the best of oils.*” They could care less about the poor.

Jesus also addresses this very same issue, by telling the Parable we just heard proclaimed. Of all Jesus’ parables---each and every one of them masterfully crafted, and laser-sharp in the point He wants to make---this Parable may, at least for me, stand out from all the others as the most challenging.

It is about.....Well, that’s really the question, isn’t it? What do YOU think it’s about? Obviously the two main “*subjects*” of this Parable that Jesus focuses on are the two men: the one Jesus identifies only as “*a Rich Man*”---Jesus never even gives him a name; the other subject is identified as a “*Poor Man*”, but to this man, Jesus names him “*Lazarus*” (not to be confused with the brother of Martha and Mary and a close friend of Jesus; that was a different Lazarus). Jesus doesn’t tell us anything about the background of either of these “*subject’s*”: what they did, where they were from, if they had any family---ONLY, that one was very rich, and the other was desperately poor.

Further, what is unique about this Parable is that there are two parts to it, almost like a “*two-act play*”: the first part was about the condition of the lives of these two men in this world; the second part showed them both, in very different circumstances, in the next world. As Jesus tells the Parable, He simply lays out the facts: He tells us that the Rich Man dressed lavishly, ate sumptuously, and was totally self-absorbed---“*super complacent*”; He tells us that Lazarus was a beggar, obviously homeless, he made his “*home*” at the Rich Man’s doorstep, day-in and day-out---possibly year-in, and year-out; he was quite unhealthy (“*covered with sores*”) and starving (“*would gladly have eaten the scraps that fell from the Rich Man’s table*”). That’s all we know. The Rich Man didn’t mistreat Lazarus; he didn’t call the police and have him removed; he didn’t yell insults or throw rocks at him. No, he was just absolutely “*blind*” to this desperately poor man, living on

his very doorstep. He was oblivious to him, or his needs, or the needs of anyone other than himself.

So, what IS this Parable about? Like all of Jesus' Parables, this one is designed to have us "wrestle" with ourselves; to grapple in our own minds and hearts about the application of this parable, and hopefully, to cause US to examine whether this sin of "complacency" has any kind of hold on my heart, or your heart?

I have to admit that this Parable is one that upsets me greatly. This Rich Man was SO self absorbed that even in "Act II", when they had both died, and Lazarus was "*resting in the bosom of Abraham*", and the Rich Man was in the *torments of the netherworld*, all he could think about was himself. He first wanted Abraham to make Lazarus his servant by sending him to bring the Rich Man water to quench his parched thirst; when that was denied, he wanted Abraham to make Lazarus his messenger to go warn his, evidently, equally "complacent" brothers for them to change their ways. I find myself getting so upset with him, but then I have to stop and wonder if that's because I find some of that attitude within myself?

While this is a very unsettling topic for most of us, it's a very common theme that we find addressed in God's Word, both in the Old and New Testaments---the matter of what we might call Biblical Justice, or Divine Justice. God constantly reveals Himself as hearing the cries of the poor; and as God's People, it follows that we should do the same.

This question of justice is actually rooted in the ultimate and most important of all the Commandments. Do you remember when Jesus was asked the question as to which of ALL God's commandments is the most important---do you remember how He answered? He said the most important of God's Commandments are two: to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength; AND to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Jesus didn't come into the world to create a new plan to end economic disparity; He didn't come to launch a social service project to find parity between the "have's" and the "have not's". No, Jesus came into the world to bring Salvation for all humanity. He launched that Plan by showing us how to Love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; we begin by doing what He invites us to do: "Follow Me". When we follow Jesus, we will see what it takes to Love

God, completely, totally, sacrificially, and to the point of total self-emptying. And then we will realize that when Jesus saved all humanity, when He poured Himself out totally for our sins----THAT's what "loving your neighbor" means.

Let's stop and try to think about a huge dream: what do you think the world would be like if we take Jesus seriously---if every person in the world would love God and neighbor in the same way as He did? Don't you think we would find that there would be no more rich or poor, "have's" or "have not's"?

But, of course, we live in this imperfect world, and so, we will never be able to reach that kind of perfection; we will only find that in Heaven. Until then, we must do all that we can to avoid that insidious sin of "complacency", and try to follow Jesus each and every day to the best of our ability.

That is what St. Paul said so beautifully in today's Second Reading from his first Letter to Timothy: "*You, man of God, (are to) pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience and prudence.*" **Pursue** those virtues----A virtuous life doesn't just happen. We don't accidentally become virtuous. It's like any other skill, human quality or talent----we have to WORK at it. That's why St. Paul urges us to "PURSUE" those virtues.

And that, my dear Friends in Christ, brings us back to Immaculate Conception School. Our Catholic Schools are the places where we not only impart an excellent and high-quality education in all aspects of academics, but that's the place where we, in support of the primary responsibility given to every parent, help them to form these young people in the ways of Faith, in the pursuit of Virtue, in what it means to be a Follower of Jesus, and to do so in an environment of Christ-like Love of God and Neighbor.

For 70 years, Immaculate Conception School has been doing that. It's to the credit of the hard work and sacrifice of the people of this parish that you have maintained this School, in good times and in these more recent challenging times, to fight for a Catholic education for your children. That, too, is what St. Paul was reminding us that we must do, when he said: "*Compete well for the faith*". We have to WANT our Faith---we have to be willing to WORK for it----we FIGHT for it-- --we COMPETE for it. Because, as Paul continued: "*I charge you before God....to keep the commandment(s) without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord, Jesus Christ.*"

But, when all is said and done, the MOST important lesson that Immaculate Conception Catholic School can teach, or that ANY Catholic School MUST teach, is: to “see” Lazarus, wherever he/she is present. Even if we can’t solve the problems of all the Lazarus-es in the world, we can at the very least see, respect, and love them in our daily lives. If we don’t do that, then our Catholic Schools are not the “distinctive”, “devoted”, and “dedicated” places we intend them to be.

Let us resolve today, with God’s grace, to live in this world, rooted in the virtuous life, “fighting the good fight of faith”, living according to the Teachings of the Church, and willingly following after the One Who calls us to Follow Him, to free us from all complacency, and to empower and inspire us to Love God and neighbor all the days of our lives. Amen.