

*This is the text of Rev. Jerry Folk's sermon at Holy Wisdom in Madison on Sunday, September 25, 2016.*

Today's readings reflect on the dangers of wealth and the destructive effects wealth often has on persons, relationships and communities. In the first reading the prophet Amos addresses some very harsh words to the wealthy elite of Israel. The culture they have created is dissolute and self-indulgent. But what angers the Prophet more than this self-indulgence is that the elite do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph, i.e. Israel. They are indifferent to the suffering they have inflicted on the poor, whose labor they suppress or withhold to maintain their luxurious life. This injustice will not go on forever the prophet warns. There will be a day of reckoning.

The reading from I Timothy addresses the subject from the perspective of the wealthy or rather those who desire to be wealthy. He warns that those who want to be rich will be trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that lead to ruin and destruction. The author offers suggestions to those who are already rich about how they can protect themselves from the corrupting and destructive power of their wealth. "Do not be haughty," he says. "Do not put your hope in your wealth but in God. Above all, be generous and share your wealth with others."

In today's Gospel, Jesus illustrates the spiritual dangers and socially destructive effects of wealth by telling one of his brilliant stories, the story of the poor man, Lazarus and a rich man. Like all Jesus' parables, this one turns the world upside down, beginning with the first verse. Notice! The poor man has a name. His name is Lazarus, which is a form of Eleazar, meaning One whom God helps. God helps the poor man. The rich man has no name. He's just a rich man. It's ironic that tradition has given him the name Dives. Dives is not a personal name. It is the Latin word for rich man. That is his identity. He's a rich man. Jesus or perhaps the author of the Gospel adds to its poignancy of this parable with phrases like, "Even the dogs would come and lick his sores," The dogs, Luke suggests, noticed Lazarus and had more compassion for him than the rich man. And that's precisely the problem with the rich man. He was trapped by the many senseless and harmful desires that wealth or the desire for wealth stir up and that lead to ruin and destruction. He was so caught up in the pleasures and perhaps the power his wealth provided that he did not notice Lazarus. Or if he did, he was indifferent to his suffering and passed him by.

Toward the end of this parable, after both Lazarus and the rich man have died, Jesus introduces a new image into the story —the image of a chasm. When the rich man begs father Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water to cool his burning tongue, Abraham replies somewhat tenderly and regretfully, "Child, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed." This chasm did not suddenly appear when the two men died. There was always a great chasm between the rich man and Lazarus. During their lifetimes, the rich man had the power to bridge that chasm, but he didn't lift finger or spend a dime to do so. Now it's too late. Now the chasm cannot be bridged.

I don't think it's necessary to say a word about how the picture these readings convey and the challenge they present apply to us and our culture today. It is all too obvious. Ours is certainly in

many ways a dissolute, self-indulgent culture that promotes in its people an obsession with wealth and the status and pleasures it can buy. And as Pope Francis pointed out recently in his remarks on the eve of Mother Teresa's canonization, it is also a culture that is indifferent to the suffering and destruction this obsession causes. And the chasm between the rich and poor is certainly still with us and is growing larger by the day. The question this reality poses for us is, "What we can do about it?"

I can't answer the question, of course. Indeed there is no definitive answer to it. But I will offer a few thoughts to prime the pump. We can with ourselves, acknowledging that we are not immune to the seductive power of wealth and the pleasures it provides. Through prayer and meditation, we can become more aware of that power in our lives and seek deliverance from it. And with gentleness and sensitivity we can try to help others see how wealth or the pursuit of wealth can undermine or even destroy their humanity, their relationships, and their communities. Christian churches as communities also have a responsibility to warn Believers and Unbelievers alike of the dangers to which the pursuit of wealth exposes them, just as the prophet, the apostle and Jesus do in today's readings. Thirdly, we can practice generosity. We already do this, of course, and our community, Holy Wisdom, does it. I see evidence of that nearly every Sunday in the bulletin. But we can always go a little further, be a little more generous. And we can advocate on behalf of policies that will improve the lives of less affluent people like an increase in the minimum wage or the reform of the criminal justice system. Finally, we can join low paid workers, minority groups and other less powerful people in their struggle for economic or racial justice.

To end this homily I'd like to share a poem by Caroline Norton titled "Little They Think." This poem is a meditation on the social reality which today's readings address.

Little they think, the giddy and the vain  
Wandering at pleasure 'neath the shady trees  
While the light, glossy silk of rustling train  
Shines in the sun or flutters in the breeze  
How the sick weaver plies the incessant loom,  
Pent in the confines of one narrow room,  
Where droops complainingly his cheerless head.  
Little they think with what dull, anxious eyes  
Nor by what nerveless, thin and trembling hands  
The devious mingling of those various dyes

Were wrought to answer Luxury's commands:

But the day cometh when the tired shall rest,

Where weary Lazarus leans his head on Abraham's breast.

Working and praying to bring that day nearer is part of our calling as Christians and our mission as church.