

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)
September 30, 2007**

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Learning from the Disease of the Rich Man

Just as in previous weeks, the words of Jesus in this week's Gospel reading remind us once again about the demands—not the pleasures—of Christian discipleship. The lesson comes in the form of another parable, this one about an unnamed rich man and Lazarus, a poor beggar suffering from open sores. Already, Jesus hints at who is important in the parable: the beggar – the one who is used to being unseen, ignored, and pushed away – is the only character in any of the Lucan parables with a name.

The first scene is descriptive in which neither character speaks, though we learn a lot about them. The rich man, in this first scene, remains rich; poor Lazarus remains poor.

But this situation is reversed in the second scene. Both men die. The details of their deaths are not important, so we resist the temptation to find out; the outcome is what is most important. The rich man becomes poor: death has overshadowed his social standing, and he is now tormented in Hades. Poor Lazarus, however, receives a place of honor – he is carried into Abraham's bosom, the place of blissful eternity.

Scripture is filled with reversals.

Hannah, the mother of Samuel rejoices:

The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor (1 Samuel 2:7,8 *NRSV*).

Amos the prophet, in this week's Old Testament reading echoes her testimony of God's character:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory; and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; ... they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away (Amos 6:4,7 *NRSV*).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, continues their jubilation in her own song of praise:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:52,53 *NRSV*).



It comes as no surprise that Jesus continues this theme in this (and many other) of his parables. So where does that leave us, as inheritors of this tradition, and what is there for us to learn?

Clearly, we are to avoid following in the footsteps of the rich man. His disease—unlike the graphic description of Lazarus’ disease—was within. We could not see his sores but we know the symptoms: a stubborn selfishness that sickened his heart and made him blind to those around him; a self-indulgent contempt for the world that hardened his compassion; a Scrooge-like hatred of his neighbors that ultimately handed him a fitting reward. When this rich man finally took notice of Lazarus, it was too late. Only then did he realize he had suffered from his own disease.

There are likely several lessons to be learned from this single parable. Be careful, Jesus seems to warn. The time is surely coming, he taught, when this world will suddenly be reversed, spun on its head, turned inside out! Jesus referred to it as the coming of God’s Kingdom, that time when God will reverse the standards of the world: the proud will be embarrassed; the powerful vulnerable; the rich tormented; the hungry full; the unwelcome honored; and the oppressed mighty.

Let this Gospel reading challenge us not to be caught at that time with the disease of the rich man in the parable. Rather, let us be caught with genuine neighborliness that sees the suffering of those around us and moves us to act...and not walk past those who lie at our own gates.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Translations Officer in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Colombia – With thanks to God for the beginning of the translation of the Old Testament for the Paez community for the formation of Bible libraries in prisons, for recordings of the new Testament in indigenous languages and in Contemporary Language, and with prayers for Scripture distribution to children at risk; **Venezuela** – With thanks to God for the opportunity to embark on the Piaroa translation for a group in the Amazon region, and with prayers for God’s blessing on plans to distribute Scriptures and resources for projects for children and young people, hospitals and prisons; **Netherlands Antilles and Aruba** – With thanks to God for the enthusiastic response to the Bible World exhibition and the interactive aspects, and with prayers for the research and revision for the first Study Bible in Papiamentu and a pilot project for the audio Papiamentu Bible.

Activity Corner: “Helping Hand” Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible; current newspapers or news magazines; construction paper (assorted colors); pens/pencils; scissors.



Read together Psalm 146. Ask several members of your household to look through newspapers or news magazines for stories about social injustice; ask others to look for stories about people being helped by others. Discuss what it means to have concern for the poor and those who are marginalized and “lie at our own gates.” Think of what steps you can take within your own community to “lift up those who are bowed down” and “give a helping hand to everyone who falls” (Psalm 146:8b, *NRSV & CEV*). Invite everyone to trace their hand on a sheet of construction paper folded in half, 8-1/2” x 5-1/2” so that one’s wrist is against the fold. After cutting it out, encourage each one to write a prayer on the inside of their hands on behalf of those situations you’ve talked about. Conclude by inviting everyone to share what they’ve written on their “helping hands” as a closing prayer.

