

[Readings: Amos 6:1a. 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31]

One comic strip that I am particularly fond of is Garfield the Cat. There is a great humor in those sarcastic witticisms of his. A favorite strip points to our Gospel today. On a cold winter night, Garfield is sitting on the living room couch, looking out the window. He sees Odie the Dog peering through the window, nose pressed against the glass, scratching to get in. Garfield thinks to himself: "This is horrible. Here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed, and there is Odie outside begging to get in, cold and hungry. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't stand it. I've got to do something." So he goes over to the window...and closes the curtains!

Rather than dealing with the poor, some of us have simply chosen to close the curtains. All of the rich people in today's readings lose their futures not through their riches, but by the lack of concern for others less fortunate, which ultimately results in lack of concern for their own eternal fate. Where can YOU be more attentive to others, especially those most in need now, before it's too late?

"Charity begins at home," the saying goes. That's also where it ends, for folks who draw the circle of responsibility with a short radius. Some of us terminate our focus of concern on only our own. Others may extend it briefly to include elder relatives, close personal friends, or grandchildren who are in financial need. For those with a cultivated sense of community, generosity might be extended through the neighborhood, parish, city or ethnic group. We reach out very generously here at St. Martin's to the poor. Thank you all for that. And for being an example to others of generous stewardship.

In this regard, the rich man at his sumptuous dinner didn't owe poor Lazarus a thing. By Jewish law, it was Lazarus' own relatives who should have been seeing to the needs of this misfortunate fellow. Lazarus was like that homeless person rattling his Styrofoam cup at us for our spare change as we pass them by or are waiting at a red light. It's sobering to recognize that we're told what the rich man wears – fine purple and white linen, but of Lazarus we hear only that his "clothing" is the sores that are covering HIS body.

Death, an equal-opportunity ending, comes for both characters, and here the dialogue formally begins. The rich man never spoke to Lazarus in life and does not do so now. He addresses Father Abraham most courteously and asks for the humblest taste of relief, which he is just as courteously denied. Discovering empathy a tad too late, the man in purple makes a second request, this time on behalf of his brothers who stand in danger of sharing his fate. Abraham points out that the brothers have all the warning they need in the words of Moses and the prophets. Caiphas the High Priest has “five brothers.” So the rich man in purple might be a veiled reference by Jesus to Caiphas.

And here’s where things get really interesting. The rich man protests that a miracle would make a difference: A man rising from the dead might be enough to save the brothers from themselves. Abraham replies that it doesn’t take a miracle to save the world -- unless you count love as a miracle. Maybe we should. Would it have been a miracle if the rich man had learned to love Lazarus at his gate? What can we call it but a miracle when a person of privilege surrenders the advantage for the sake of the disadvantaged?

This is a precisely what Jesus did when he did not insist on equality with God and took on human likeness, including human vulnerability. If we want to participate in the life of Christ, this kind of transforming love is exactly what we’re bargaining for.

Most of us like to find ways like these to wash our hands of the suffering that lies beyond our realm of perceived responsibility. The rich man in the story is no different. The rich man knew Lazarus by name, which makes his sin even greater as he chose to walk by him, walk over him, and ignore him as he went back and forth from his home. He is arrogant in life, but even more so in death as he dares to order around both Father Abraham AND Lazarus in the next world! What cheek! All too soon, the rich man will learn to his dismay that Father Abraham is the father of Lazarus as well. He cannot order either one now as he ordered his slaves on earth.

How far is our love and compassion obliged to go? More to the point: How far is our obligation to *do something* about human suffering expected to go?

St. Paul writes to Timothy: pursue righteousness, patience and gentleness. Not only with the folks we know, but with the folks we don't know.

A common penance I give to people who confess to judging others, people who confess to discriminating against others, or people who confess outright to their bigotry is this simple reflection and request and prayer: "Lord, let me see these people through YOUR eyes, as YOU see them."

Jesus takes down our walls of bias, brick by brick, with teachings about loving enemies, blessing those who curse us, returning good for evil, and forgiveness for injury. When Jesus forgives His murderers from the cross, there's nowhere to hide from the truth: We can't wash our hands of anyone. Charity may begin at home, but it can't stay there.

Our humanity makes us one. Our humanity gives all of us dignity. Our humanity gives all of us the right to a voice. Together we seek the common good: closing the great chasm between Lazarus and us. Here, in this world, while we still have the time to do it before we die.

A Sunday school teacher told his class today's story about the rich man and Lazarus. He pointed out how one man went to Hell and the other man went to Heaven. He also pointed out how rich one man was and how poor the other man was.

After the teacher taught his lesson he said to the class, "Now which would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus?" One clever boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I'd like to be the rich man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I'm dead!" Whatever decision YOU make today, when you die, you will live with its consequences for all eternity in Heaven or in Hell.

The rich man needs Lazarus every bit as much as Lazarus could use a benefactor. Salvation is at our fingertips, waiting for us to stretch out our hands to receive it. Choose wisely, choose well, and pull open those curtains! AMEN!