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Pursuing justice by seeing Lazarus at our door

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The Peace Pulpit

As we listen carefully to the lessons today, we discover some things about the reign of God -- the realm of God where God is in fullness of presence -- and what we pray for when we say the Our Father, "Thy Kingdom come."

Some of the things in the reign of God surprise us.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
First of all, in today's lesson in the parable, Jesus shows how in the reign of God there is a reversal of what we might be used to. In our world, who is recognized by name? The rich, the powerful. Well, in the parable, the rich man has no name and Jesus is giving us a hint that in the realm of God things get turned around.

The poor man has a name: Lazarus. In the parable, the rich man -- because he knows the name of Lazarus -- obviously knew Lazarus was present at his doorstep, but he went right by him never paying any attention.

So here again we see a reversal.

In the afterlife Lazarus the poor man is in the bosom of Abraham. That would be being at a feast, like the Last Supper where John the disciple is described as leaning on the breast of Jesus; he's in the place of honor. The rich man is not even present at that banquet in the afterlife. Again, this shows how God has a preference -- what we have come to call even a preferential option for the poor. It's the poor who are valued, cherished, loved. Those who are self-sufficient have a lesser place. In fact, in this case, they're not even present.

If we take these lessons and what Jesus is telling us here in this parable, if we take them seriously, we can understand quickly that there is something dramatically wrong in a situation where the rich would have everything and the poor would be like Lazarus -- a beggar, dying of starvation, open sores that even the dogs come to lick.

In 1971 Pope Paul VI asked the bishops of the world to come together in a synod and in that synod he said: "I want to discuss the question of justice in the world," -- so that you would not have any situations like this where there would be even one person dying of starvation, where in a just world every person would have an opportunity for a full human life.

So the bishops at that synod carried on a very lengthy discussion and here is part of what they spoke about:

"How is it, after 80 years of modern Catholic social teaching, 2,000 years of the Gospel of love, that the church has to admit her failure to make more impact on the conscience of the people? This is not to say that Catholic works of mercy have not been immense, nor that the flame of charity does not burn unquenchably in the breast of thousands upon thousands of religious and laity who give their lives to the service of the poor, the aged, the sick, the orphaned, the forgotten."

What they're saying is, over these 2,000 years, the church -- we, God's people, disciples of Jesus -- we've done works of mercy, we love, we are ready to give to the poor. But the bishops say (and they stress this again and again) that "the faithful, particularly the more wealthy and comfortable among them, simply do not see structured social injustice as sin" -- so "they simply feel no responsibility for it, no obligation to do anything about it. Sunday observance, the church's rules on sex and marriage tend to enter the Catholic consciousness profoundly as sin." But then here's what they say: "but to live like Dives with Lazarus in our midst is not even perceived as sinful."

There is an application of today's parable that we might not advert to immediately.

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Could it be that you and I are living like Lazarus [is] in our midst and we do not even perceive it as sinful? Look at the situation of our world. One-fifth of the world's people are like Lazarus at our door, in absolute poverty, starving -- 30,000 children dying every day from hunger or hunger-related causes -- and one-fifth of the world's people, among whom would be ourselves, with 87 percent of the world's wealth.

Are the bishops at that synod off the mark when they say we have a world where Lazarus is at our gates and we do not even see it as sinful?

Well, you might say: "Why would it be my sin? I care about the poor."

In fact, when something tragic happens like that earthquake in Haiti seven months ago, there was an outpouring of people saying: "What can I do? How can I give to help?" But how many of us -- and I'm sure you were among the ones who were quick to give -- thought of this as a structured social injustice, which means it's a sinful situation. It doesn't happen by chance and it isn't because of God that the people of Haiti are in desperate poverty, that it's the poorest nation in our hemisphere.

I'll give you one easy example of how this is structured social injustice.

President Clinton himself recently apologized publicly because it was during his administration that part

of this structured social injustice destroyed the agricultural sector of Haiti so that Haiti could no longer grow the rice the people of Haiti needed for food.

This is what we mean by structured social injustice. It's a way you organize society so that it works to the detriment of individuals or groups within the society. And in the late 1980s, we -- the United States government and other governments from the rich nations, the eight developed nations (the "Group of Eight" they call themselves) -- forced a free trade act on Haiti. That means no tariffs so that we can trade with Haiti, send our goods down there -- no tariffs, and they can do the same thing to us of course: send their goods here.

But here's where President Clinton came in.

In 1995 he signed an agricultural bill that provided billions of dollars of subsidy for farmers in our country. Before 1995 Haiti imported only 7,000 tons of rice -- that's all they imported. By 1996 they were having to import 196,000 tons of rice. Their farmers could no longer grow food and sell it to their own people because we could grow the food here with our farmers. It's more expensive to grow the food but because they're subsidized through our government we can undersell the Haitian farmer.

So the Haitian farmer has to leave the land, go to Port-au-Prince -- where the city went from 250,000 people to three million -- because there is no place else they could go. They couldn't make a living on their farms any longer. That's what we mean by structured social injustice.

Most of us, I think, have not had an awareness of how -- because of public policies, because of legislation that we support and have a participation in, because we're citizens of this country -- we cause people to become poor. Because once the Haitian agricultural sector was gone, the prices of rice began to go up. Now the poor people can't afford to buy the rice they need to live.

Most of the time we don't always take these parables and see how they really apply to us. Here is an example of how we have a situation in the world where the people of Haiti are like Lazarus at our gate and we don't even perceive it as sinful. We don't see anything wrong with that.

We give of our resources and yet we don't allow the people of Haiti to come out of poverty. We have part of the responsibility for their becoming the poorest nation in our hemisphere. That's what we mean by structured social injustice. Any of us who is a citizen of this country, we share in what President Clinton confessed to, apologized for, because he had signed that farm bill that enabled us to undersell the Haitian farmers and put them out of work -- and caused the people of Haiti to starve.

If we listen carefully to today's lessons then we can learn from this parable.

We can learn from what the prophet Amos says in the first lesson today, how "Thus says the God of hosts: Those who are at ease in Zion, those who feel secure. Alas for those who lie in beds of ivory and lounge on their couches, and like David, improvise on instruments of music, who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of the poor."

It isn't wrong to have the material things -- that's not what Amos is saying -- but if we have them, we deprive others of having them and we never grieve over the plight of the poor and never work to change it. Then Amos says: "Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of those who lie in ease shall pass away."

God is watching what is happening and there is a warning there for us that we must listen to this parable of Jesus -- listen to the words of the prophet Amos -- and take it seriously.

It's our responsibility to try to reach out to that poor Lazarus at our gates -- the poor people of the world who are deprived of a full human life because we have structured the world in a way that takes it away from them. It happens in Haiti; it happens in other parts of the world and it is time that we began, as the bishops of the conference at the synod said, to understand we have some responsibility -- a personal responsibility to do something about it.

That means we have to engage ourselves, and that same synod said, in action for justice -- participation in the transformation of the world. These are the ways you live the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so we must begin to do action for justice -- participate in the transformation of the world in order to make a person like Lazarus have the chance for the full human life that every one of us has the right to and that God intends for us to have.

So finally, perhaps we listen as Timothy has instructed so clearly in the second lesson today:

?Pursue justice, pursue godliness, live faith and love, maintain endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the fullness of life to which you were called and for which you made your baptism in the presence of many witnesses.?

Together with Timothy, we try now to live that life that we received at baptism -- a life that calls us to pursue justice, godliness and love.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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