

Heart disease

Mary McGlone | Sep. 28, 2013 | Spiritual Reflections

As I consider today's story about Lazarus, I recall chauffeuring a visitor from our sister parish in El Salvador through Kansas City, Mo. The quiet, the order, the lack of people walking in the neighborhoods were all part of the cultural puzzle he was trying to piece together. But perhaps more than anything, he was astounded at the large homes we passed in a nice area of town. I was at a bit of a loss about how to respond when he asked, "How many families live in that house?" and, on seeing a three-car garage, "Can every family in the house afford their own car?" Listening to him reminded me of a neighbor of ours in a little coastal town in Peru.

We lived in an area without electricity and where the pump for the town well seemed to break down more often than it worked. The majority of the people lived in one- or two-room adobe homes with dirt floors, and many had a little patch of land on which they cultivated some beans, corn, grapes, pecans or mangos. More than one household had fewer pairs of shoes than family members so that their attendance at any special occasion was limited by the inadequate contents of what passed for a closet.



One day, a leading woman in the parish was talking about people stealing corn. She was complaining about those who came in the night to clear a field, but was quick to add, "I'm not talking about mothers who pick five ears of corn to feed their families." Giving vivid, but unconscious, expression to her self-perception and profound attitude of solidarity, she added, "Those of us who have land must never harvest everything, we must leave something for the landless. If we, the middle class, have a hard time of it, what must it be like for the poor?"

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:11-16

Luke 16:19-31

If she was middle-class, what were we, the sisters, whose house had a cement floor and individual bedrooms? Over and over in being with Latin American friends, I have discovered a chasm between my neighbors' and my own perception of what is a normal, adequate way for people to live.

Many commentators take pains to assure the faithful that readings like today's do not condemn wealth, but rather selfishness. But there is no getting around it, they warn against an ever upwardly mobile perception of what is a normal or average lifestyle. Those who defend well-being are correct in saying there is nothing wrong with enjoying a comfortable life. What should be condemned and remedied is the opposite of comfort: the

poverty that stunts potential, suffocates hope and engenders feelings of inferiority.

At his first canonization ceremony, Pope Francis reportedly preached that "comfortable living" can cause what he called "gentrification of the heart." That seems to have been the problem of Amos' people and the rich man of Jesus' story. For the most part, they could rightly say that they didn't think they were doing anything wrong. They were simply enjoying what had come their way ? assured that they deserved it. Of course, the major problem here, as in so much of our lives, was not the sin of commission, but of omission. Amos points out that the ruin of Jacob left the merrymakers apathetic. The rich man (and how many of his guests?) did nothing worse than remain blind to an ailing stranger, a victim of disease and cool indifference.

These readings invite us to question our comfortable blindness. The worst thing about the blindness we encounter in these Scriptures is unawareness of it, abetted by resistance to recognizing it. When someone brings danger to our attention, we are generally grateful because their warning saved us from something. But, if that same person directs our attention to needs to which we could, but don't want to, respond, we may feel more irritated than appreciative.

Both Jesus and Amos would insist that we are responsible for one another. For an even more radical statement of the case, consider the words of St. John Chrysostom: "Remember this without fail, that not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs."

The world around us will call that foolishness. Advertising wants us to focus on our wants rather than others' needs. Amos calls us to question our contentment. Jesus reminds us to open our eyes and our hearts to the needy at our door -- be that the door of our nation or neighborhood, our church or our own home. Pope Francis calls us to consider how our affluence may cause us serious heart disease.

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