

26th Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *Lay hold of eternal life.*
September 25, 2016
Readings: Amos 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

It is a common courtesy to call another by his or her name. I think I am on safe ground in saying that many priests struggle to learn the names of the people who come through their doors each week, or struggle to recall names from past assignments when we see them years later. But try to imagine for a moment being called by your name, years after having been ignored routinely.

In today’s Gospel we find encounter a rich man who suddenly finds his fortunes reversed. The very person whom he had ignored for so long is now the very one whose name he is calling. “Father...send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” All of the sudden, Lazarus is not a faceless man, but an individual with a name and an identity. The rich man even calls him by name, perhaps for the first time ever. He who showed no mercy to the poor beggar at his door, now himself seeks mercy from Abraham and even the beggar.

Our account follows in the heels of last week’s parable about the dishonest steward, with only two brief verses separating the accounts. It further illustrates the teaching of Jesus about the prudent use of material possessions, as you will recall the “eternal dwellings” mentioned last week. These eternal dwellings remain our calling, but so often we confuse worldly wealth for the eternal dwellings of God.

In some cultures, street beggars are so common that they are hardly even noticed; they mix right into the background. Several years ago, the European Fundamental Rights Agency estimated that Italy alone has approximately 50,000 child beggars in the streets. It is not difficult to see how a beggar could be routinely ignored or even could go unnoticed.

Closer to home, it is quite apparent that more people are at street corners with signs in and around the Cathedral, West 7th street, at freeway exit ramps, etc.; they are omnipresent in Saint Paul. While I rarely give money, I have made sandwiches or perhaps you might consider having a granola bar at hand, if you wish to assist. It is never easy to discern the best response.

Nor were beggars ever lacking in Jerusalem, in particular at the outer gates of the Temple. Both the Old and the New Testaments mention begging.¹ The most visible sign of poverty was, then, like it is today, the beseeching child. (Lam. 4:4). In the time of Jesus beggars were everywhere, so Jesus and the disciples often had close contact with them. But today the tables have been turned.

In this account, the rich man ends up being tormented. But this raises a question—is he tormented by Lazarus, or is he tormented by the own realization of his own past? He calls Abraham “Father” as if he has this intimate spiritual relationship. He is calling out all the stops in his vain attempt to gain sympathy for his position. He is insisting on his kinship with Abraham, “the father of all Hebrews.”²

His callous attempt at redemption is too late. We cannot escape this realization that the clock has run out—it is too late. Our choices in life have consequences, and our loving Father in heaven is also a just judge. He will respect the freedom of our decisions, but we do not possess an infinite number of chances. Particular judgment happens at the moment of death, neither a moment sooner, nor a moment later. Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.

¹ Cf. Deut. 15:7, Ps 109:10

² Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, 14, 255

The New Testament repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus, the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, and other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny that can be different for some and for others.³

Each of us receives our eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of death, in a particular judgment that refers our life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—this could happen immediately or through a period of purification, which refers to the removal of the effects of our sins, whose guilt has been forgiven (purgatory), or the person’s soul could be lost forever.

This account is so gut wrenching because on a human level many rooting for the rich man. Look, he is making a last effort...he is trying, right? How could the Lord ignore his plea? But the solemn Word of God is instructive on this point. Consider the Letter to the Hebrews: “It is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes the judgment.” Or in St. Paul Letter to the Corinthians, “Each one will receive his pay, according to his works.”⁴

As St. Paul said to Timothy, the time has come to “lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called.” This is the Good News of Jesus; this is our calling. Let us never deceive ourselves into thinking that we will not be held accountable. Far from scaring us, we are motivated to draw near to Him who is our Hope and our salvation. God continually invites us to His heavenly banquet. Through our lives of faith and good works, let us answer with a resounding Yes.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 1021

⁴ Hebrews 9:27 and 1 Corinthians 3:8