

26 Sunday Ordinary Time, C

Every time when I read one of the Lord's parables, I am trying to find myself among its characters. The story doesn't really come alive until and unless I can see that it has something to do with me. In some of his parables, it is easy to do. I read and find myself thinking, hey, he is talking about me. At other times it is more difficult to do. I have to look for myself in the story, because at first I am not sure if it has anything to do with me.

The parable in today's gospel reading is like that. It has two main characters. One of them was very rich; and the other was very poor; and I have difficulty relating to either one. By world standards, most of us would be regarded as rich, but still we don't feel rich. Probably not many people do. But neither can we see ourselves as Lazarus, a pathetic man, covered with sores and begging for a few scraps of food.

The majority of us fall somewhere between those two extremes. We are neither rich nor poor. We are not totally insensitive to the needs of others, and neither do we find ourselves begging for bread. So what has this story got to do with you and me?

This story has two chapters. The first is set in this world, and the second in the world beyond. There the roles are reversed. Lazarus is settled in Abraham's bosom, and the rich man is tormented in the place of the dead. Part of his torment is memory. He remembers his five brothers, who are still at his father's house. So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them to change their lives. He insists that if someone went to them from the dead, they would repent. But Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead."

Now. I have found our place in the story. If we look closely, we may recognize ourselves among those five brothers. We are still here. We have the witness of

Moses and the prophets. We even have the testimony of one who has risen from the dead. We have an opportunity to repent and to change our lives.

So what do we need to repent of? In what way do we need to change our lives and correct the mistakes of our departed brother?

First, there is not mention in the story that the rich man was dishonest, that he had gained his wealth through corrupt business practices. His crime was not stealing money or having money. It was what he did with it. He “dressed in purple and linen and feasted every day.”

So far as we know, that is about all he did with his money. He used it to wear the best clothes and eat the finest food, to entertain himself. Now, I suppose there is nothing wrong with good clothes and good food. But in a world like this, if a man can think of nothing but his personal appearance and pleasure, there is something wrong with that man.

Some of us need to repent of the concept that the life is primarily a matter of fun and games. It is a good thing to have fun, and a person should certainly include a few games in his or her agenda. But you and I were not put on this earth just to run and play. There is more than that.

One of the main problems with a program of perpetual amusement is that it ceases to be amusing. Inevitably, we find ourselves wanting to do something else, something useful, something constructive. There is more in life than fine clothes, and fine food, and fun and games. The rich man in our story never figured out what that was, but you and I have a chance to correct his mistakes.

The next thing we need to repent of is our unawareness of other people and their problems. From reading the story, I get the impression that the rich man was not overtly cruel to Lazarus or totally indifferent to him. Otherwise, he would not have come there to beg day after day. The rich man apparently flipped him an occasional coin and let him eat the scraps from his table. But he never really saw

him a fellow human being. He never found out who he was, what he was, and where he hurt. Charity can be so condescending and dehumanizing unless it comes from a charitable heart that really cares about you as a person.

Some of us need to repent of our unawareness of other people and their problems. It is better, I suppose, to give scraps than to give nothing. Enough scraps will fill an empty stomach, but a bucket full of scraps will not fill an empty heart.

It is better to write a check than not write a check, but a check alone will not do the job. It takes more than money to meet this world's needs. When a man is broke, and sick, and hungry, and down on his luck, he obviously needs money, and food, and medical care. But he needs one more thing - he needs love, and he needs that just as badly as he needs all the rest. That is probably the most difficult part of charity. When we encounter human need, it isn't enough to throw money and give scraps. We have to give ourselves, to become really aware and involved with other people and their needs. That is the only kind of help that really counts.

The rich man never learned that, and most of us have not either. But like his five brothers, we are still here; and we have a chance to do something about it. We can learn from his mistakes. **Amen.**