

HOMILY SUNDAY 26-C (Homily 02)

“To Love is to Care”

(Amos 6:1, 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31)

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“Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, who lie on beds of ivory, but are not grieved over the sin of Joseph.”

“But are not grieved over the sin of Joseph.” This is a striking comment that begs further explanation.

Back in the early seventies, one of the first folk hymn writers after the Second Vatican Council, Joe Wise, wrote a hymn called *Teach Us To Pray* in which he prays that God will help us see the sin of *I don't care*.

That is a great prayer, because that phrase, that attitude, is so devastating. *I don't care*, are shocking words to those who do care, who really are invested in a situation or a relationship. *I don't care* really means I don't love; I am not interested; you or your situation means nothing to me; I don't want to get involved; leave me alone. There is a sad loneliness that surrounds those words.

That is what has the prophet Amos so upset in the first reading. The sin of his contemporaries is the sin of *I don't care*. They are pampered and spoiled, selfish and self-centered, a self-absorbed people concerned only with their petty comforts and interests. They have no passion; no feeling for the plight of the poor of their day, they are not angry nor upset at the injustice that surrounds them. Worse, they are part of that injustice and unfairness, and they don't see it.

Amos is a true prophet sent by the Lord to try to wake up the people of his time, to shake them up and get them involved in correcting the injustice, to get them to change their lives and their habits so that they can truly be God's people once again.

In the Gospel Jesus is dealing with the descendants of the same stubborn, selfish, rich people, the religious leaders of his time, the scribes and Pharisees who love money. As he so often does, he tells them a story to try to get through to them. Theirs is the same sin as their ancestors. Even as religious leaders, they have in a way sold their souls to the lure of wealth, fame and power.

The unnamed rich man in the story is commonly known as Dives, which is Latin for “rich man.” He personifies the very people Jesus is dealing with. He basically does not care about Lazarus, the poor man at his gate. Dives, like the people of Amos time, is probably a nice, likeable fellow. His sin is the sin of *I don't care*.

It is interesting that the reality of the chasm between heaven where Lazarus ends up, and the flames where Divas ends up, is a strong feature of the story. That spiritual chasm cannot be crossed after death.

What is sad is that there is a social chasm between Divas and Lazarus that keeps him from reaching out to help Lazarus. It is like Lazarus has become invisible, simply part of daily life, something to be ignored or tolerated. There is a saying that all it takes for evil to triumph is for enough good people to do nothing. This chasm could easily be crossed, if only someone or something could get through to Divas' heart, to reach his soul, to penetrate his blindness, to point out the eternal ramifications of his selfish lifestyle, to put the commandment to *love your neighbour* back on his radar screen, to shake him out of his lethargy and simply reach out to Lazarus at his gate.

This story is as much alive today as it ever was. In so many ways we are Dives. When the singing group *Up With People* came to Malvern, Arkansas back in 1969, one of the cast members wanted to do a story on the racial situation of the city. He visited a black high school where one of the teachers told him if a coloured person so much as stole a can of hair spray from a white store, the whole weight of the justice system would fall on that person. But if a coloured man killed another coloured man, the white police system took forever to do anything. It was like the coloured people did not exist, like they did not matter. The white society did not care. Their philosophy, the teacher said, was to “ignore and tolerate” and in some ways, that was more devastating and defeating to the black population than outright racism, because the good white folks could boast that there was no racism in their city.

They needed a prophet like Amos to shake them up. Incidentally, the cast member who interviewed the teacher was not allowed to send his article to the local paper, as the cast directors thought it would be too disturbing. Perhaps he was too prophetic.

Another striking feature of the story in the Gospel is the refusal of Abraham to send someone from the dead to warn the rich man's brothers. He is told that if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, whom they have, they won't listen to

someone who comes back from the dead. There is grim irony in that statement, for that is exactly what happened to both Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, and to Jesus himself.

When Lazarus was raised, the Jewish leaders were so upset that they planned to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. What blind, stubborn sinful irony – plotting to kill someone who has been raised from the dead! And of course, history is filled to this day with people who do not believe that Jesus was the messiah and was raised from the dead. Jesus in that story was simply being prophetic himself in having Abraham claim that they would not believe if someone came back from the dead.

We are left with the question – in what way could be we like Dives, the rich man? In what we are we blind to the needs of the poor around us, the needs of our own family members, our own community members, the members of our own church?

What are the social chasms that continue to separate us from each other? How often do we bow to statements like, “We don’t talk to them,” or “As far as I am concerned, they don’t exist anymore.” How long will we accept intolerable situations where we don’t talk to one another, where we make no effort to heal divisions, mend past hurts, understand and forgive those who wronged us, apologize to those we have hurt?

This gospel is not just a story about an unjust situation long ago. It is an invitation for us to do some soul searching of our own lives, right here and now. There will be no special dispensation for those who refuse the needs of the poor at their gate. If the brothers in the story will not hear the words of Scriptures and be merciful, they show that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of God’s mercy. By the end of the parable, we realize that we stand in the place of the brothers, and the question is whether we will hear the Scriptures and repent.

St. Paul in the second reading puts forward the ideal – we are to strive to be righteous, loving, caring and gentle. Above all, we are to live the commandment of Jesus as fully as we can. That commandment is to love God with our whole being, by loving anyone in need around us, as we love ourselves. We are to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. We are to even love our enemies by forgiving them and doing good to them. Such is the gospel imperative that has eternal consequences. Surely we will not ignore this call to repent and to deepen our efforts to love and care for all those in need.

**Resisting this call to be more merciful, caring and understanding can put us in the**

situation of an unforgiving person who sent a letter to the jailer of a small county jail addressed to an inmate. The name on the envelope did not seem to be registered at his institution. While attempting to search his memory for the inmate's name, on the chance that the addressee may have been in the jail at some previous time, he turned the envelope over. A note scribbled in pencil on the back of the envelope clarified the situation. It read: "If not in jail yet, please hold until he arrives."

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a great unifier – bringing together people from all walks of life, erasing all social barriers, calling us all to be one in the Lord.

May our celebration today empower us to go out and make that unity in Christ happen outside the walls of the church, by our lives of selfless caring and love for all in need, regardless of social standing or class.