

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; Luke 16:19-31; I Timothy 6:6-19

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15. The prophet Jeremiah had the depressing task of constantly and consistently bringing to the nation of Judah bad news, for his task was to call both the people and the powers of Judah to accountability for their rejection of Yahweh and of Yahweh's shalom community. In fact, Jeremiah's message was so depressing that the word "jeremiad" has entered into the English language, meaning "a prolonged lamentation or complaint". It is both magnificent justice and grace, therefore, that God allowed Jeremiah the privilege of being the first prophet of the Babylonian Exile to proclaim a future and a hope for Israel. This privilege is acted out in the Old Testament lesson for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

This story occurs in "the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, (king of Babylon)" (32:1). That means this event occurred in 588 BCE, less than a year before Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, the city and temple leveled, the nation absorbed into the Babylonian empire, Zedekiah executed and Judah's leadership taken into exile as captives of the Babylonians. It was precisely this date that makes this story both so pivotal and a sign of hope.

Picture the scene. The city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army. All the other cities of Judah have fallen to the Babylonians and they have taken the entire country except for Jerusalem. But King Zedekiah refuses to surrender to the empire, but continues to hold out, believing that in some miraculous way God will deliver Jerusalem from these pagans (a popular belief at the time was the inviolability of Jerusalem because Yahweh's temple was there; Jeremiah often spoke in opposition to this belief [cf. Jer. 6-7]).

Jeremiah had publicly called upon Zedekiah to face the reality of the situation, to surrender to Babylon and to throw himself upon the mercy of Nebuchadnezzar. Because he didn't accept the myth of Jerusalem's inviolability, Jeremiah could honestly see the situation for what it was – God's punishment upon Judah's leadership for their commitment to being a society of domination, oppression, greed and exploitation masquerading as a people loyal to and serving Yahweh because they observed all the proper rituals and liturgies of the temple. Therefore, Jeremiah knew that defeat and Judah's destruction was inevitable; pragmatic politics consequently required admitting the truth and suing the opposition for peace.

But Zedekiah wouldn't embrace Jeremiah's proposal. Instead, because Jeremiah spoke his criticism publicly, Zedekiah imprisoned him, seeking to shut him up. Thus, the king whose obdurate actions would lead to his own imprisonment and execution, imprisoned the only one giving sane political advice as to how to handle this crisis. It was while he was in prison, and at the darkest and most pessimistic moment of Judah's history that Jeremiah was given the privilege by God of speaking a message of hope to Israel.

God reveals to Jeremiah in prison that his cousin, Hanamel, will come to him to offer his field in Anathoth (Jeremiah's hometown and a town already taken and controlled by Babylon) to Jeremiah for sale. God instructs Jeremiah to purchase the field (v. 6).

Hanamel does visit Jeremiah, and does offer the field in Anathoth for purchase to Jeremiah. Hanamel does so, he says, because “the right of possession and redemption is yours” (vs. 8). That is, the laws of Jubilee require that, if a person must divest himself of property because of debt or other financial exigency, it must first be offered to “the next of kin” and then on to all kin before it can be offered to someone outside the extended family (Lev. 25:23-28; Ruth 4:1-10). This was done in order to guarantee that the birthright of land given to each Hebrew family at the conquest of Canaan would remain in that family, and would continue as the foundation of that family’s wealth and security in perpetuity. And Jeremiah is the next-of-kin.

But Hanamel likely has a much more cynical reason for offering this field to Jeremiah. Anathoth is already taken by Nebuchadrezzar and already belongs to the Babylonian empire. It is, in other words, an entirely worthless piece of land. It is the height of foolishness to buy a field when the whole land is about to be lost!

But true to God’s instructions, Jeremiah buys the field! The transaction of that property from Hanamel to Jeremiah is so carefully detailed (vss. 9-14) that it is clear that the author of this book wants the reader to know that this field was indeed legally purchased and legitimately transferred over to Jeremiah.

But why is it so important that the reader know that Jeremiah had, indeed, legally purchased this field and that title had been transferred to him? The reason is made clear in the final verse of this Old Testament lesson: “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (vs. 15).

“Defeat is not final”, Winston Churchill once declared. Yes, Judah will have to fall to the Babylonians, Jerusalem will have to be destroyed and its inviolable temple leveled, and the nation will have to be absorbed into the Babylonian empire. But such a disastrous defeat doesn’t mean that God is through with God’s grand experiment to create the shalom community on earth. Through their captivity, God will do a work of redemption and transformation in Israel, and the result will be that they will return to their homeland a chastened and much more God-directed (justice-directed, equitable-directed) people. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land”. Domestic and commercial life will once again resume in Israel, and the nation will once again be restored to its homeland.

Thus, the primary bearer of bad news in the Old Testament is given by God the opportunity to share good news with the people. And that good news came to realization many decades later when the kingdom of Persia conquered the Babylonian empire, and its king restored the Israelite captives to their land once again!

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16 is a well-known psalm, assuring those who are faithful to God of his protection. But, while beautiful, it can also be somewhat naïve. It begins with what are the best lines of the psalm.

“You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust”. For he will deliver you

from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler” (91:1-4).

The image is of God as a great bird, protecting its chicks under its wings and keeping them from attack from other creatures, disease or from capture by humans. One is immediately reminded of Jesus’ poignant cry to Jerusalem, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37). Thus, in this psalm, God is envisioned as a protecting bird keeping its chicks from harm.

It is at this point that the psalm begins to go astray. The author, captured by his own poetry, begins to expect too much of God. “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes, and see the punishment of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent” (vv. 7-9).

The image changes in this section to a soldier in the midst of battle. Slaughter is going on around him, but he is kept safe by the intervention of God. Those who fall in battle, the Psalmist suggests, are “the wicked” receiving their just “punishment”. Because the one praying this psalm is not wicked, “no evil shall befall you”.

Would that it were so. But it is not. Bad things do happen to good and even Godly people every bit as much as they happen to ungodly people. Evil and misfortune happen to us all. So the author of this psalm is guilty of overstating his case.

It is at this point that the author realizes the precipitous direction in which he is heading. And therefore, he provides a last-minute correction.

“Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation” (vss. 14-16).

It is not that only good things happen to God’s people; bad things happen, as well. Thus, the Psalmist is asserting that God will not keep us from ever experiencing trouble. Rather, it is that God “will be with (us) in trouble”. It is that God will both be of support and encouragement to us when we face trouble, and will “show (us) God’s salvation”. The truth of this passage lies in its awareness that faith in God brings balance and perspective to life, so that one is better able to cope with the problem currently weighing one down. Thus, we can enter into the crises that face us with more equanimity because we know that this is not all there is to life and that we are surrounded with the love of God that will see us through to the other side! This is the wisdom of Psalm 91.

Luke 16:19-31 continues Jesus parables on money, built around his rubric, “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (16:13). But in dealing with the Pharisees, that is precisely who Jesus is dealing with – the ruling and moneyed elite “who were lovers of

money” (vs. 14). Jesus speaks frankly to them. “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God” (vs. 15). Jesus then presents the issue standing before each Israelite – Pharisee as well as tax collector, rich man as well as beggar – in his famous Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

In this parable, Jesus tells of a rich man “who was dressed in fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day”, as well as a poor beggar named Lazarus who sat at the rich man’s front gate, longing “to satisfy his hunger with what (might) fall from the rich man’s table”. Both men die. Lazarus is taken to the bosom of Abraham (i.e., heaven) while the rich man goes to Hades. The rich man, seeing the former beggar in heaven, calls out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (vs. 24). But Abraham refuses, stating that there has been a great reversal arranged by God that cannot be altered (“Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony” vs. 25), and therefore there is a great chasm fixed between Lazarus and the rich man, between heaven and hell. The rich man then asks Abraham if Lazarus could go to warn his five brothers of the fate that awaits them if they do not change their handling of their wealth. But Abraham refuses, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (vs. 31). The parable ends there. Surprisingly, Jesus adds no application or moral to the parable, as he does in most other instances. Perhaps he doesn’t need to, since the lesson is within itself clear enough.

In this parable, Jesus is clearly making a contrast between the dominating power and wealth of Israel’s elite and its poor. He opens the parable by telling the hearer that the rich man “dressed in purple and fine linen”. These are the clothes, not only of the very rich, but of the nobleman, as well. Clothes dyed purple were clothes normally reserved for nobility because the dye was extremely rare and costly. Egyptian “fine linen” was the most luxurious cloth available in the ancient world. Thus, Jesus is telling his hearers that this man is extremely wealthy, is likely a noble, and is therefore very, very powerful. This is reinforced by Jesus’ reference to the gates of the man’s mansion before which the poor Lazarus sits. Only the most powerful and influential Jew would own a gated compound; the very mention of gates in the ethos of the day would communicate a picture of the urban elite who would control the economic and political life of the city and of the people.

But Jesus also makes clear that this rich man is not only wealthy and powerful; he is guilty of the most conspicuous consumption, as well. That consumption is manifested in the very luxury of both his clothing and of his estate. But it is also demonstrated in the important note that the man “feasted sumptuously every day”. That is, he not only threw banquets for the elite; he threw banquets every day for himself and for whoever might grace his table. Only the emperor would do that! Thus, this man is so wealthy and powerful that he seems on a par with the Roman emperor.

Lazarus stands in dire contrast to this rich man. Jesus tells us that “a poor man named Lazarus” lay at the rich man’s gate at the entrance to his estate, was covered with sores, “longed to satisfy

his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table" and was subject to the dogs licking his sores. This is as miserable an image of a man that Jesus could possibly draw.

Lazarus is a destitute beggar, part of the "expendables" of Israelite society. The expendables, made up of orphans and widows, the destitute, beggars and shepherds were those who had fallen from peasantry into destitution. The lot of Israel's peasants at the time of Jesus was tenuous at best. Because even the most successful farmer, artisan or merchant would realize only about 12% profit from his or her labor, she or he had no significant savings or wealth behind him/her. Consequently, a single reversal of fortune (such as severe sickness, an economic downturn or even the wedding of a daughter) could plummet the peasant into the "expendable" class, where he or she would struggle to stay alive. And once that happened, the possibility of ever returning again even to the level of being a peasant became only a dream. This was what Jesus was telling those who listened to his parable by calling the man a beggar.

Jesus makes clear the straits in which poor Lazarus lived as he was at pain to describe the conspicuous consumption of the rich man. He describes Lazarus as a destitute beggar, in ragged clothes, with ulcerated sores, and lying at the rich man's gate. This is describing a man "cast down" by the circumstances of life when it is stacked against the peasant and for the rich. He is described in the most pitiable way.

Jesus goes on to tell us that Lazarus was at that rich man's gate in order to gather that which might fall from the rich man's table to assuage his hunger. Lazarus is looking for just a few crumbs in order to sustain his life. In Israelite society, there were no napkins at an elegant dinner party. What would be used would be the loaves of bread. At a sumptuous party, one would take a pita-like or tamale-like circle of flatbread, tear it in order to use it as a utensil upon which to scoop up the food (and eat the bread with the food) and reserve a portion of the torn bread upon which to wipe one's hands as one dined. Having wiped one's hands on the bread, one would then toss the used piece onto the floor. Servants would later sweep up all the pieces from around the dining table and would toss it out the door onto the street for the dogs to eat. That was what Lazarus was waiting for – the bread "napkins" to be tossed out the gate and onto the street, so that he could fight the dogs for it.

There are, however, indications in the text that something highly imaginative is about to happen. Jesus names the beggar "Lazarus" – and this beggar is the only primary character in any of Jesus' parables ever given a name. The rich man, on the other hand, is nameless (the name "Dives" given to him was not a name given to him by Jesus; "dives" is simply the Latin for "rich"). The name "Lazarus" means "helped by God" or "God has helped"; although that name seems in stark contrast to his actual life. Perhaps God is about to do something that changes all that.

Both Lazarus and the rich man die. Jesus tells us that the rich man "died and was buried" – that is, he had had a proper funeral, with an adequate time for mourning and likely as ostentatious a send-off as had been his life of conspicuous consumption. It is also assumed by the text that he died in full conformity to the Torah and therefore received all the appropriate rituals of the Jewish religious system that would have signaled that he had been a man blessed by God because he was such a "good" man (as his wealth would clearly attest to the people of his day).

Lazarus, on the other hand, “died and was carried away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham”. In other words, Lazarus received no proper burial. Given his position in society, his body was likely cast upon the garbage heap of Gehenna outside Jerusalem and burned.

But it doesn't end there. Lazarus awakens from death to find himself in “the bosom of Abraham”. And he finds himself an honored guest in this heavenly place, for he is seated at Abraham's side (vss. 23b, v. 22 implied; the Greek can be as legitimately translated “to Abraham's side” as “to Abraham's bosom” or, as in the NRSV, “to be with Abraham”). To sit at Abraham's side is for Lazarus to be the guest of honor at the heavenly banquet (see John 13:23). So, not only has Lazarus died and gone to heaven; he is God's most honored guest there! Lazarus had indeed been “helped by God”. And the truly great banquet is to be this heavenly banquet at which Lazarus is guest of honor; it is intentionally meant to contrast with the earthly banquets and conspicuous consumption of the rich man.

But for the rich man, the scenario is quite different. “In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side” (vs. 23). In first century Jewish thought, “Hades” was a place where sinners were sent who had not received just judgment for their sins in their life on earth; it was a place of great pain, judgment and punishment. The “sins” of this rich man, obviously, had been in wallowing in his wealth and his conspicuous consumption, brought about by his commitment to and benefiting from the very political and economic forces that both made him wealthy and thrust people like Lazarus into expendability. More than that, he had refused to address the social ills of the people (like Lazarus) that had been in his face; yet he chose to ignore the need rather than to use his money to right the wrong. That this was true is captured by Jesus in the rich man's clear recognition that it was the beggar Lazarus sitting at Abraham's side. The rich man obviously recognized the former beggar at his gate. From the rich man's perspective, he should be at Abraham's side; yet here was this beggar in the place of honor at the heavenly banquet!

The reaction of the rich man to this scene is intriguing. He commands, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (vs. 24). Even in death, where society is clearly turned upside-down, the rich man can't help but treat Lazarus like a servant. He is still an elite, free to give orders, and to expect them to be obeyed. And he expects Lazarus to do his summons, so that his need can be met.

Of course, the rich man gets a rude awakening from Abraham. Abraham explains that in God's kingdom, the ways of the world – even the kosher world of the Torah -- are turned upside down. “Remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things (understood: primarily because of your practice of economic and political policies that forced peasants into expendability, and covered up this injustice with religious practice centered on ritualistic purity); but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony” (vs. 25). At the very least, this rich man should have extended the compassion of hospitality to the beggar at his gate (cf. Amos 5:12-15), but he could not even do that – so caught up was he in his own conspicuous consumption. Therefore, he is sentenced for penance to Hades, “and between you and us a great chasm has been fixed”.

The rich man tries to bargain with Abraham. He uses his family as his bargaining chip. “At least send Lazarus to my five brothers so that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment” (vss. 27-28). He still sees Lazarus as his servant. He does not recognize that Lazarus was also his brother, as a fellow human being and as a fellow Jew, as precious to God as was he.

Abraham puts it in the starkest terms. “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them. For if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (vss. 29, 31).

The Law and the Prophets, the writings of the Old Testament, the entirety of Torah itself makes clear what is the obligation of every Jew, Abraham responds to the rich man. “He has shown you, O mortal, what is right; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love one another tenderly and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). It’s all there – in plain view. God’s longing for all of us is to act justly toward each other, to share wealth equitably, to change a society to eliminate an “expedable” class as well as men enslaved by conspicuous consumption, and “to walk humbly with your God”. If the powerful, wealthy and influential in society won’t be convinced that they must be centered in working for the common good (including committing their wealth to that purpose), and see that as the very essence of their relationship with God, then even one rising from the dead will not convince them – even if it be Lazarus or Jesus!

William Herzog writes, “This parable is not a story about abstract social types, but a story about representatives of two social classes, the urban elite and the desperate expendables, those who had nearly everything and those who had almost nothing. In this case, wealth may indeed lead to Hades, for such wealth could be obtained only by the systemic exploitation of the poor, and it could be maintained only by their continual oppression. The urban elites who lived at the expense of the poor twisted Torah and Temple to serve their ends. They read Moses and the Prophets for their comfort. Their wealth and its use in conspicuous consumption, their rapacious greed and its extraction of any surplus from the poor, their pursuit of power and privilege with its accompanying suppression of the people of the land, all these characteristics of the rich man’s class reveal that its wealth is no sign of blessing but of curse. This parable, insofar as it is a proclamation of the reign of God, is not proclaimed to everyone as good news. It is good news to Lazarus but bad news to the rich man. This is God’s preferential option for the poor” (William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 128).

I Timothy 6:6-19 is Paul’s insight on the relationship between wealth and Godliness. In the Epistle Lesson for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Paul has three things to say about wealth.

First, in 6:6-10, Paul stresses that an underlying principle of sound Christianity is that of being centered on perceiving and carrying out God’s call on your life rather than seeking after wealth or power, prestige or position. “We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it”, Paul writes; therefore, be willing to live simply and proportionally. People who center

their lives upon the accumulation of wealth “fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction”. Is it really that important that one is dressed fashionably, or surround one’s self with the little luxuries of life when one-quarter of the world goes to bed hungry each night? Why live your life climbing the corporate ladder or seeking to build the largest portfolio? After all, no matter how much wealth you accumulate or how much power accrues to you in your pursuit of wealth and high position, it will never satisfy you. As John D. Rockefeller answered when asked by a newspaper reporter how much money one needs to have in order to feel secure, “Just a little bit more!” As Paul so simply and yet eloquently put it, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith” (6:10).

Second, rather than being centered on the accumulation of money and power, Christians should be centered on being Christ like in the world. In verses 11 through 16, Paul presents the mark of a Christian who is truly living out her/his faith. We are to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” (vs. 11). We are to “fight the good fight of the faith” – that is, to remain focused upon the primary mission to which God has called us – and that’s not to make money! We are to “keep on keeping on”, to act out our faith “keeping our eyes on the prize”. What is that mission? Like Jesus, we are to make the “good confession” as Jesus did before Pilate (Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2). We are to be centered in working for God’s kingdom – a shalom community of justice, equality of wealth and of relationship with God.

But what if you, as a Christian, are already wealthy? What if wealth comes to you, rather than you striving for wealth? If God’s economic abundance (“he owns the cattle on a thousand hills”) spills over into your estate, what are you called to do with the wealth you have?

Third, wealthy Christians are to use their money for Christ and His Kingdom (vss. 17-19). Paul gives two pieces of advice to wealthy Christians. First, you are not to become preoccupied with your wealth or to become arrogant as a result of it. Remember that wealth is at most a temporary and uncertain reality that can change with the collapse of the market or a shift in fortune! Your certainty, as a Christian, needs to lie in God and not in your wealth.

But also, see your wealth as a gift given you by God for the purpose of advancing God’s kingdom, not your own. Use your money to work for justice, to battle local or world poverty, and to enrich people’s relationship with God. “The (wealthy) are to do good (with their money), to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (vss. 18-19). See your money as opportunity to substantively address the problems of the world, especially the elimination of extreme poverty, the empowering of the poor, the rescuing of our environment, the cessation of war and strengthening people in faith. Live your lives recognizing that you have been given both a great opportunity and a great responsibility to use your wealth to transform at least some portion of the world. Your wealth is not for your own enjoyment. It is an investment God has made in you for you to use to change the world.

This, then, is Paul on wealth – perhaps not as dramatic or as prophetic as was Jesus, but eminently practical as one sees all of life as stewardship – to be stewards of our money as well as

our time and our talent in order to bring Christ's shalom community to the world. And that is our ultimate mission, no matter how much or how little money we might have!

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