

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Amos 6:1, 4-7
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, O my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Timothy 6:11-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Though our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 16:19-31

The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. And today, we're looking at, I think, one of the parables of Jesus that—at least in my experience in the classroom—students are the most interested in or most curious about because it gives us the clearest depiction of Jewish ideas about the afterlife on the lips of Jesus. So Jesus gives us a clear portrait in this parable about at least what he and certain—I imagine—other Jews in the first century who were in his audience thought about what happens after someone dies. So the mysterious phrases “Abraham’s bosom”, or the reference to Hades, these realms of the dead. So we’re going to look at this parable and try to unpack it. We’ll look at both the worldview behind it—what does it say about the realm of the dead (or realms of the dead), and also, what’s the meaning of the parable, what’s the message that it has? In Luke 16:19, another story about another *plousios*, another rich man:

“There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz’arus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Laz’arus in his bosom. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz’arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.’

But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz’arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.’”¹

Okay, lot going on here in this parable — just a couple of quick points about the parable as whole before we get into its meaning. This is the only parable of Jesus in the Gospels in which Jesus names one of the characters in the parable. Usually the people in the parables are unnamed. It’s a rich man and his steward, or a man goes out to sow, or a woman, you know, loses a coin, or whatever it might be. It’ll be a kind of general reference. In this case, Jesus actually names one of the characters Lazarus, and this is given all kinds of speculation as to why that’s the case. For our purposes here, it’s at least interesting to note that we have here a parable about a man named Lazarus who got sick, who died and who (at least it was suggested) that he might rise from the dead and go and call others to repentance. But Abraham says that they wouldn’t repent even if someone had risen from the dead.

It’s fascinating because in the Gospel of John 11, one of Jesus’ most famous miracles involves a man named Lazarus who was sick, who died and who rose again, and even though he rose from the dead, people still didn’t repent and believe that Jesus had come and that Jesus was the Messiah. So anyway, it’s just kind of an interesting parallel there. Sometimes scholars speculate that John knows Luke, or Luke knows John or it’s the same Lazarus. In any case, for our purposes here, I just

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

would make the point which is very clear, that Lazarus's name is a Greek version of *Eleazar*. The name Eleazer in Hebrew means "God has helped." So in the context of the parable, there's an irony there to that name because in his life—in his earthly life—no one helped Lazarus. But after his death, God comforted him. God helped him. The angels of God brought him to Abraham's bosom where he was comforted and he found a place of peace.

So in any case, not sure why Jesus names the character here, but he does. You should know—another thing—that the fact that one of the characters was named and one wasn't, though, led eventually to the rich man being named as well. So sometimes in the Catholic tradition you'll hear the parable called the parable of Lazarus and Dives. D-i-v-e-s. That's not the rich man's name, it's just the Latin word for "rich man." So what happens is as the Greek was translated into Latin, the Latin word for rich man became the man's name...kind of like "Richie Rich" if you grew up in the 80s like I did. And his name was "rich man." In any case...so, the story here is of a rich man and a poor man. So in this case, the rich man—two features of his life are highlighted. First, his life of luxury, right, so notice what he's doing: he's wearing fine clothes, he's clothed in purple. Now if you know anything about the ancient world, you'll know that purple dye was very expensive to come by, and therefore purple clothing was something that was often worn only by royalty or by the wealthy. So, kings would often dress in a purple robe to show their wealth, to show their splendor. So this rich man is extremely wealthy, because he wears rich clothes.

The second way you would know someone was rich in the ancient world—there are two keys ways—what did they wear, and what did they eat. And actually, that is still true to this day, right? You can find out how wealthy someone is by how many clothes they have, what kind of clothes they have, and how well they eat. And the same thing was true in antiquity, so he not only dressed in purple, but he feasted—sumptuously—every single day. Now in antiquity, this would be very unusual. Most people had a day-to-day existence; they'd eat bread, they'd eat some fish. And on occasion—whether it'd be at Passover or Tabernacles on special days—they would have a feast, like when the prodigal son comes home: "Let's kill the fatted calf; we're going to have a great feast." But you didn't feast every single day, unless you were rich, and I mean really rich.

So this guy is extremely wealthy. He's living a life of luxury. He's also living a life of gluttony, because you don't have to feast every single day. In fact, it's not good for your health to do that. But this guy is doing it....so, luxury and gluttony, two of the seven deadly sins. So keep that in mind, those are already on the table here in the parable. By contrast, he sat beside a poor man who lays outside the gate. So that's the thing...he lives inside a gated community. If there are gates to your community, it's probably a wealthy community. The poor do not live in gated communities. So this guy has a gate to his estate; Lazarus is laying outside of the gate, full of sores. So notice...what's Lazarus' condition? He is sick, and he is starving. So he's covered with sores. This could imply...some people have thought that this means he was a leper. It's not clear; it just says he has sores. So he's sick with some kind of serious illness. He's also starving. He's not just hungry—he's starving. Because notice what it says: "he desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table." In other words, he'd be happy to eat out of the trash can of the rich man, he's so hungry. And this also should kind of make you think it's a kind of echo of the prodigal son. Remember, he was so hungry that he would even eat, he wanted to eat the pods that were cast to the swine...but no one gave him any. So the same imagery is used here. It's actually... the same verb being used to describe the starvation of the prodigal son is being used to describe the starvation of Lazarus here. So he's sick and he's hungry.

And if you've ever been sick or really ill, you know that often times you can get very hungry. And to be sick and hungry at the same time is excruciatingly painful. So Lazarus is in a terrible condition here. And there's an irony: his name means "God has helped him," but it doesn't look like God has done anything for him so far. Finally, last but certainly not least, if you recall, in antiquity—in ancient Jewish culture—dogs were seen as unclean animals, because for one thing, what dogs would do in ancient society, is they would go around and they would eat the dead. So if someone was dead and unburied, like a poor person, or someone who had been killed/murdered in a field, it would often be the dogs who would come and eat their bodies. So they were carrion-eating animals. They weren't seen as loving pets like we do today. And so in this case, Lazarus' condition is so miserable that although he receives no help from human beings, these unclean dogs come and at least show him the compassion of licking his sores.

Okay, so those are the contrasts there—very stark contrasts between Lazarus and the rich man. And what happens is they both die. Now in this case, it says Lazarus died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. Now this appears to reflect the idea that you see in other Jewish sources from the first century AD, that the souls of the righteous are carried by angels to the place of peace or the place of repose here. Some scholars have suggested that Lazarus’ body is being described as carried away here. I don’t actually think that’s the case because other Jewish sources talk about the souls of the righteous, in a sense, being escorted by the angels to the place of peace. You can see that in the Testament of Asher 6:4-6. But notice here also, the place of repose for the righteous dead is called “Abraham’s bosom.” Now, this is the only time in the New Testament that we see this expression, “Abraham’s bosom,” so it’s a little bit mysterious. What exactly is it referring to?

Many scholars have suggested that this appears to be a name for the realm of the dead that goes all the way back to the Old Testament idea of being gathered to your ancestors, or gathered to your fathers. So in the book of Kings—so for example, 1 Kings 1—it uses that imagery of being gathered to your fathers. So when you die, the idea is that you would go to join your ancestors. And the imagery of the “bosom” of Abraham, the word *kolpos*—which means your chest—might be, could be, an imagery, an image of having a special place at a banquet table. Because if you recall in the Gospel of John, when the disciple (the beloved disciple) has a special place of privilege at the banquet of the Last Supper, it says he laid his head on the bosom of Jesus, because he has the place of pride at the banquet at the Last Supper. He’s kind of right next to Jesus. So in Luke’s Gospel, early in the Gospel, Jesus actually uses the image in Luke 13 of the kingdom of heaven as a banquet. You know, “those of you who will sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” So the idea of being at a banquet table with Abraham is used by Jesus himself elsewhere to describe, you know, the kingdom of heaven, to describe the afterlife.

So it’s a little bit of a mysterious phrase, but what is clear is that he’s gone to a place of the dead to be with the righteous patriarchs of the Old Testament, to be close to them, very close to Abraham and to be comforted after death. And it’s interesting here, the Greek word for “comforted” is *parakaleō*. We get the word

“paraclete” from that, the comforter. It’s also the same word used by Jews in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says, “Blessed are they who mourn, they shall be *parakaleō*”—they shall be comforted. In other words, you’re sorrowing in this life, you’re sick in this life, you’re suffering, you’re starving, but in the world to come, you will be comforted, you will be consoled. And that’s what happens to Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom.

What about the fate of the rich man? Not so good—he has the opposite fate. Notice that it says, “The rich man also died and was buried.” So the implication there is that the rich man is buried but Lazarus probably isn’t buried, because often times the poor would be left to die. Not just left to die, but after they were dead, if they didn’t have anyone to bury them, their bodies would remain unburied, and they would just rot or be eaten by dogs. This is something that would happen to the poor in antiquity. Now, because of that, Jews did have a law, that it was a mitzvah—a commandment—that if you found an unburied person, you would bury them. That was considered a grave obligation, and not to do it was kind of seen as a mortal sin. But in this case, it appears, it is at least implied, we don’t know for sure, that whereas the rich man is buried, Lazarus isn’t. In any case, the rich man is buried, and he goes to Hades, where he is in torment, and he lifts up his eyes and sees Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. Alright, so let’s pause there.

What does it mean, what does Jesus mean when he says that the rich man goes to Hades? Okay, well here we have another term for realm of the dead that’s a little obscure or at least probably veiling—it has different meanings. So originally, the word Hades was just a Greek translation for the Hebrew word *sheol*, which was the realm of the dead. So in the Old Testament, in the book of Ecclesiastes 9 or Psalm 89, *sheol* is just the name of the realm to which all the dead go. So if you’re dead and it’s the Old Testament, you go to *sheol*. Whether you were good, whether you were bad, or somewhere in between, everybody goes to *sheol*. But by the time of Jesus, in the Second Temple Period, the ideas about the afterlife had become much more definite, and in the book of Sirach, for example, chapter 21:9-10, by the second century BC, the term Hades gets used specifically to translate the realm of the damned. So it becomes a kind of more narrow term, referring to the place where the wicked go—not just all the dead, but either a part of *sheol* or the place within *sheol* where the wicked are. So you can think of it as two sides of the

railroad tracks, right? There's a good side and a bad side. So Hades becomes more aligned with describing the realm of the wicked, and you can actually see that's how Jesus uses the word Hades in the Gospel of Luke itself. If you go back to Luke 10:15, you remember when Jesus was going to Caper'na-um and Tyre and Sidon and Beth-sa'ida and these different places, and they're rejecting him. In Luke 10:15, Jesus says:

“And you, Caper'na-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.”

So notice there, how does Jesus use Hades earlier in the Gospel? As the opposite of heaven. So a person's either exalted to heaven or brought down to Hades. So if they accept Jesus, they're going to be exalted to heaven. If they reject Jesus, they're going to be brought down to Hades, which obviously in this case, implies the realm of the wicked or the realm of the damned. So that's how Hades is being used in this parable.

So the rich man goes to Hades, he sees Abraham far off, and Abraham is in peace, Lazarus is at peace, but he is in torment and in a place of flames. So those are the two features of Hades: anguish (or torment) and flames. So it's a place of fire and a place of suffering. Notice something also here: that the rich man can see Lazarus and Abraham, and that he says there is a chasm fixed between them. Now when I listened to this parable growing up, I always kind of imagined it as like the rich man is down in the underworld, and Abraham and Lazarus are up in heaven. And that's possible, but it's interesting that for other Jewish sources in the first century, we also have descriptions of the afterlife that depict it in a sense one realm with two sides, with a chasm in the middle. So rather than it being like heaven down there—ha, heaven down there—hell down here and heaven up here, they can also see it along a kind of horizontal axis with a chasm. So for example, in *4 Ezra 7*, which is a first century Jewish writing, it says this:

Then the place of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of Gehenna shall be disclosed, and opposite it the Paradise of delight.²

That's *4 Ezra 7:36-37*. So according to this view, it's like one realm of the dead with two parts: gehenna, which is a place of torment and flames, and then paradise, which is a place of rest and peace. And either way, whether it's up or down, or left and right, the idea here is that these two realms are divided. There's a chasm between them, and you can't cross the chasm. You can't cross the great divide. So notice what the rich man says: "Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue." Now I want you to think about this: even in death, the rich guy treats Lazarus like he's a slave. Notice, he speaks to Abraham with respect, "Oh Father Abraham, well could you send your servant Lazarus to get me some water and dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm in anguish here and in these flames." Unfortunately, Abraham says, "Sorry, there's a chasm between us, and no one crosses from one side to the other." So in response to that, the rich man says, "Well, then I beg you, send him back to my father's house, to my five brothers to warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." And Abraham says, "Sorry, can't do that either." Listen to this: "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them." Pause here.

Notice what Abraham's saying. They have the Scriptures; that's all they need. The Scriptures—that's what "Moses and the prophets" means—it means the first part of the Bible, the Torah (five books), and then the prophets, which is the second part of the Bible. The Jews had three parts: law, prophets, and writings. The Prophets contains both the prophetic writings but also all of the historical books like Kings and Samuel and all. They call all of that the prophets. They still do to this day. So what Jesus is doing there, or what Abraham is doing, is mentioning the first two parts of the Bible: the law and the prophets...and saying, "Look, they have the Scriptures. That's all they need. Let them listen to them." And then the rich man protests, he says, "No, no, no, no. If they see somebody come back from the dead"—in other words, they witness a miracle—"then they'll repent." And Abraham says, "If they won't listen to the Scripture, it doesn't matter. Even if they

² *4 Ezra 7:36-37*; trans. B. M. Metzger

see someone raised from the dead, or rise from the dead, they will not repent.” It’s not going to convince them. End of parable, and it ends on that very hopeful note there.

Okay, so what’s going on here? Well, Jesus is once again talking about the dangers of wealth. This is something, a theme that we’ve seen over and over again in the Gospel of Luke in particular—it’s in all of the Gospels—but it’s in Luke in particular. Luke is very focused on highlighting the teachings of Jesus that have to do with the dangers of wealth and also the difference between earthly wealth and spiritual wealth. And in this case, we have a very profound parable—a very striking parable—about the fate of a wealthy person, this rich man who ignored the poor man Lazarus’s suffering and starvation. Now, for my money as I—no pun intended—as I (I really didn’t intend that one)...

For my money, what’s striking about this parable is what the rich man doesn’t do. I want you to notice something. If you think about Jewish morality in terms of the Ten Commandments, notice what the rich man doesn’t do. Does it say that he’s an idolater? No. Does it say he breaks the Sabbath? No. Does it say that he stole from anyone? No. Does it say that he was a liar or an adulterer or a murderer or any of those things? No. All it says is that he lived a life of luxury and a life of gluttony that led him to fail to love his neighbor, to fail to care for the poor man and the sick man who was right there at his gate. So what’s striking to me about this parable is that the rich man is condemned to Hades—often translated as Hell—for a sin of omission. There’s no evidence he broke any one of the Ten Commandments explicitly, but he did fail when it came to the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, which can be summed up by one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

So this is a really powerful parable about how wealth can lead us to fail in charity toward other human beings and that failure—a grave failure—in charity toward other human beings can be the cause of the loss of eternal life. And I just think that that’s something that we don’t often think about nowadays. I mean, how many times have you heard people in the modern world say something like, “Well, I never killed anybody.” You know? “I’m a good person. I never killed anyone.” Okay, well, that’s setting the bar rather low in terms of ancient Jewish morality, in

particular in terms of Scripture. Sins of commission are evil, but sins of omission can be equally grave depending on the gravity of the omission. And in this case, the factors involved in his failing to love Lazarus by caring for him, or at least feeding him, are two things: luxury and gluttony. He's living a life of comfort and ease. He's living a life focused entirely on himself, and both of those, of course, are rooted in the capital sin of pride, which is a disordered self-love that leads him to be blind to the sufferings of those around him and to do anything about it. And that is what Jesus is warning us about in this parable—the hardness of heart that can come with luxury and gluttony and wealth. So, I mean, we see it elsewhere in the Gospel: it's easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is like Exhibit A. This is a parabolic description of that maxim, of that teaching of Jesus, about the dangers of wealth and how it can lead to eternal damnation and the loss of everlasting life.

Okay, on that happy note, let's turn to the Old Testament reading, another prophecy from the book of Amos, in this case, another oracle against the wealthy. This is one of the themes in the book of the prophet Amos. Amos is a simple shepherd, a dresser of sycamore trees, and he's a herdsman. He's not a wealthy person, and so one of the things he does in his book is he delivers these oracles against the rich who are wicked. And this is what he says in Amos 6:1, 4-7:

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,
and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samar'ia,
the notable men of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel come!
Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the midst of the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David invent for themselves instruments of music;
who drink wine in bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first of those to go into exile,

and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away.

Okay, so what's going on here? A couple of things...so the context is that Amos is railing against the sinful wealthy of the northern tribes. So when he says/talks about Joseph, Joseph is one of the many names for the northern tribes. Sometimes they're called Joseph, sometimes they're called Ephraim—who is one of the sons of Joseph. Sometimes they're called Samaria. Sometimes they're called Israel, just to keep it simple. So, any one of those names can refer to the northern kingdom or the northern tribes. And at the time of Amos, there's...the northern tribes are rife with wickedness, idolatry, and what he's describing here is the fact that sins of the leaders of Israel are ultimately going to lead them into exile. So he's railing against these wealthy Israelites, and notice...what are the sins that he's describing? Again, in this oracle he's not putting the emphasis on idolatry or adultery or any of those things, he's putting the emphasis on sloth, on laziness, and on living lives of luxury and gluttony.

So that's the connection between this parable and the parable of the rich man in the New Testament. And you can see this, look at how he describes them. They're living lives of ease, right? Actually, here he's talking about "ease in Zion", so he's also speaking against Jerusalem. Zion is the name for Jerusalem. Samaria is the name for the northern kingdoms, so he's actually speaking to both of those there. But then he says, "Those who lie upon beds of ivory," they're laid out on their couches, they're eating lambs, they're drinking wine, so notice, what are they doing? Resting at ease, being slothful and being gluttonous. To add insult to injury, notice what else they appear to have their focus on: entertainment. They're singing idle songs with their harps. So again, most poor people, if they wanted to enjoy music, they'd just sing. They didn't necessarily own instruments. Even to this day, instruments can be expensive to purchase. But the wealthy, they could have harps that would be played for them in their homes, so that they could enjoy music in their homes. So the idea that entertainment, luxury, good food, good wine...they're not eating bread every day; they're eating lambs and calves from most of the flocks. So they're eating meat every single day. That's a sign you're rich, by the way. If you're eating three meals a day and it involves meat every day, you're rich, okay—at least by biblical standards. So, if you're eating five meals a day, then—ah, anyway—I'm not even going to go into that.

Okay, so the point is...by ancient standards, these are extremely wealthy people, and what has happened? Their luxury and their sloth has led them to be indifferent to the sufferings that are going on in the ten tribes of Joseph and also to the sin that's taking place amongst those ten tribes. And ironically, their negligence is going to lead to them being the first people to go into exile. In other words, they're going to suffer first. They're going to bear the brunt of the Assyrian empire coming in and decimating the kingdom and bringing the rich and the wealthy into exile.

So Amos here is giving a warning to the rich, that if they keep living these lives of luxury and gluttony and sloth and entertainment, they're going to feel the punishment. They're going to feel the Divine judgment come down upon them in the form of the Assyrian exile. So notice the difference here, too. Amos talks about the sin of the wealthy leading to earthly punishments in this world, whereas Jesus is going to talk about the sins of the rich man leading to eternal punishment in the world to come or in the life to come. So there's a difference there, but there's also a similarity. And you can see that the similarity here is also linked by the Responsorial Psalm for today, which is Psalm 146. And what does it focus on in verse 7 and 8? It focuses on God's love for the poor. It says:

[The Lord] executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

So here we see God's preferential love for the poor and for the hungry, and that's the bridge between the Old Testament passage and the New Testament passage today.

Okay, in closing, I just would like to give you a brief quote from the living tradition. This quote is from St. Jerome. He actually wrote a whole homily just on the parable of Lazarus and Dives, or Lazarus and the rich man. And here's what he has to say:

The rich man, in purple splendor, is not accused of being greedy or of carrying off the property of another, or of committing adultery, or, in fact, of any wrongdoing. The evil alone of which he is guilty is pride... Lazarus was lying at the gate in order to draw attention to the cruelty paid to his body and to prevent the rich man from saying, "I did not notice him. He was in a

corner. I could not see him. No one announced him to me.” He lay at the gate. You saw him every time you went out and every time you came in.³

And there’s another Church Father that makes the same point as Jerome, he says, “You know that the rich man knew Lazarus because when he gets to the afterlife, he knows his name”—when he tells Abraham, ‘Tell Lazarus to come and cool my tongue.’” So Jerome’s point here is the rich man ends up in Hades, not because of any sin of commission, where he violated one of the sins of the Ten Commandments, but because of the sin of failing to love his neighbor.

So in closing, my question for you and the question for all of us is (that this parable raises): Who is the Lazarus in your life? Who is the person who’s suffering or sick, who needs your help, but for whatever reason—maybe because you’re too focused on your own comfort, maybe because you’re too focused on entertainment, whatever it might be—who you have neglected to care for. Who is the Lazarus in your life, and how can you not be like the rich man...but show compassion and love of neighbor to the person right at your gate who is in most need of your help?

³ Jerome, *On St. Luke on Lazarus and Dives*, trans. M. L. Ewald, p. 201