

“Take Hold of Eternal Life”

Amos 6:1-7; I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Proper 21-C, September 25, 2016

All three of the Scripture lessons read in our worship service this morning could easily remind us of that old adage: **“You can’t have your cake and eat it too!”** Why? Because there really are some things—in this life—that are mutually exclusive of each other! To have one is to forfeit the other!

In the words preceding our Gospel lesson, Jesus has just said: **“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13)!**

In the **Old Testament lesson today (Amos 6:1-7)**, the **Prophet Amos, a SOUTHERNER BY BIRTH FROM THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH, was led by the Holy Spirit of God into the NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL**—to speak a rather disturbing message to the people there about the **ever-widening gap in Israel** between the **“Haves”** and the **“Have-Nots.”**

God is concerned that many of the wealthiest people in the nation have become completely oblivious to the plight of the poor. So it’s in **very picturesque language** that Amos admonishes those people, whose lives are primarily committed to the false god of pleasure! There they are **lounging around on their ivory couches**, eating only the **choicest cuts of lamb and beef!** All the while they are being entertained **“musically”** by professional singers with exceptional voices, accompanied by **harps!** They are **drinking** only the **finest vintage wines**; having anointed themselves with the **finest of oils to moisturize their skin and, perhaps also, to deepen their tans.**

These actions, of course, are not sinful in and of themselves. But the number one indictment against them by God is that: “They are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph” (v. 6)!

So can’t we see then that very bold connection between our Old Testament Lesson today and another Parable that Jesus shares with us in our Gospel Lesson: “The Rich Man and Lazarus” (Luke 16:19-31)?

This parable of Jesus is just **chocked full of contrasts and reversals.**

- **The poor man is named** while the rich man is not.
- **The rich man is dressed in purple cloth**, while the poor man is only adorned with sores!
- **The rich man feasts sumptuously every day, while Lazarus, looking up**, longed only to be fed with any kind of leftovers that may have come to him from the rich man’s table.
- **Both of these men must have died in a close range of time to each other; another reminder that death is always: “The Great Equalizer!”**

But just when the lives of these two men are about as far apart from each other as they could possibly be; there is a great shift that takes place in Jesus’ sharing this parable with us!

All of a sudden there is a great reversal of roles! Much like the funnel on an old-fashioned hourglass, ALL THE SAND THAT WAS ON ONE SIDE OF THE FUNNEL has now been drawn through that narrow sieve of death to be distributed on the other side. THE ONE WHO WAS AFFLICTED—IS NOW COMFORTED! AND THE ONE WHO LIVED COMFORTABLY IS NOW IN AGONY!

The real lesson of Jesus' parable comes in the conversation between the rich man and Abraham after the rich man and Lazarus have both died!

Two points are being made here: **(1) One point regards the finality of a person's place in eternity at the time of their death.** Nothing could be done for the rich man once he had closed his eyes in death. **(2) The second point regards the importance of you and me listening to the Word of God** now if we want to escape the rich man's fate.

Certainly both of these messages are given to us repeatedly by other passages in the Bible too. Just listen to the words of Jesus in **John 5:25-27**: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live! For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man!"*

And St. Paul also shares these words with us in 2 Corinthian 5:10: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil!"*

So the question that the Old Testament Lesson and the Gospel Lesson, and even the Epistle Lesson are placing before every one of us this morning is: **"Are you listening?"**

Certainly you must know that this is the **question that many politicians are asking of voters these days as another Election Day is fast approaching on Tuesday, November 8, 2016!** They are all trying to ask us the question: **"Are you listening?" "Are you paying attention?" "Do you know what the issues are?" "Do you know what the candidates stand for?"** Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera...

Today's Gospel lesson raises the same question—but more profoundly—"Are you listening!" And St. Paul in his words to **Timothy** in our second lesson reminds us that we have **nothing less than our eternal future riding on the balance of this question; nothing less than our own future; our eternal future; our future place in eternity!**

Suddenly between them there is now this great reversal of roles. On the one side is Lazarus—in the arms of Abraham, nestled as a child is sometimes nestled in the arms of its mother; who at long last now is fed and safe and warm; an experience that Lazarus must have never had throughout his whole time on earth.

On the other side of this great divide, an impassable chasm, there is the rich man who on earth never knew anything but what it meant to live in the lap of luxury, but who now in eternity is being tormented in a very low place; left to gaze hungrily. Sadly, this man is none the wiser because of his experience of death; he is still trying his best to act like a little king, commanding Abraham to order Lazarus to get up and serve him, **"Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame" (v. 24)!**

But Abraham answered him, **"Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish" (v. 25)!**

It seems that the whole time the rich man was on the earth he never came to realize just how good he had it, making him also blind to the needs of others far less fortunate than he was, who geographically speaking were only a short distance away!

Friends, the real problem with the rich man was not that he was rich, but what he allowed his money to do to him. He allowed his money to completely blind him to the needs of others. He spent his money totally on himself without any regard for the poor one at his gate. His sin can point us to the dangers we face in relationship to our own possessions. And the danger is not really in the amount of our bank balance. The danger is that dollars may easily become blinders that keep us from seeing the needs of those around us.

What in the world could ever move uncaring, unsympathetic human being to step out of their privileges in their desire to help others! It's not just a command God gives for us to follow. It requires a transformation taking place within us that only God himself, through the good news of his salvation for us in Jesus Christ, can bring about for us! It is possible only because of Jesus Christ. You know how St Paul expresses the Gospel so beautifully to the Corinthians: *"Even though he was rich, for your sakes, he became poor, so that you might become rich through him"* (2 Cor. 8:9)!

But please let me ask you now another question: Whom do you most easily identify with in parable Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson about "The Rich Man and Lazarus"? We probably would find it difficult identifying ourselves completely with the rich man, because most of us here this morning are probably not rich! But we would probably have an equally hard time identifying ourselves with Lazarus, because most of us are not poor either! PERHAPS THE BEST PLACE TO IDENTIFY OURSELVES THIS MORNING IS AMONG THE FIVE BROTHERS. On the rich man God's judgment has been pronounced, but there is still time for the five brothers. For those brothers a moment of true decision-making was still hanging in the air!

It's interesting, however, that when the rich man, now in torment, asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to remind his five brothers of the importance of their repenting of their sins and to receive God's forgiveness and grace while there is still time, Abraham responds: *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."* And the rich man said, *"No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent."* Abraham replied: *"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead!"* **And here Jesus is predicting now not only his own death and resurrection, but prophesying that even when the good news of our Savior's death and resurrection will be proclaimed—many who hear the Gospel will turn a deaf ear to it just the same!**

One of the most **misquoted verses in the whole Bible** does appear in our epistle lesson today: **I Timothy 6:10**. Many people misquote that Bible verse this way: *"Money is the root of all kinds of evil,"* but this isn't really what the Bible says. **It's important that we don't omit the four words that precede these words—and these four words are:** *"For the love of..."*

The Bible doesn't say that money is the root of all kinds of evil! **It says: "For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil!"** Paul also reminds us here that: *"Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, in to many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this*

craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs" (I Timothy 6:9-10)

Maybe you have heard that humorous little story about New York City. Apparently most of those people live in high rise towers, condominiums, apartments and the like—New Yorkers love their pets just as much as any other American people do—living anywhere throughout this great country of ours! Yes, there are millions of pets in New York City, but when that pet dies there is no place to bury it unless you have a jack hammer. So the city offers to dispose properly of your pet's remains for \$50.

One woman believed that this could be the key to her opening a business of her own. So she offered an ad online to her fellow New Yorkers—promising that she would dispose of their pet's remains for half of that price! She would only charge them \$25 per pet!

Sure enough, she was getting several requests a day from people wanting to take advantage of what they believed was a great offer. So how did she do it? She would go down to the **GOODWILL STORE** and buy the best looking suitcases she could that were all priced under \$5. She would then place the deceased pet in the suitcase and take it with her for a ride on the subway. **Without a fail, every time, as she leaned back into her seat, pretending to be asleep,** someone would come running along and snatch the suitcase. Sometimes she would call out: "Stop! Thief!" but they just kept running!

Can you imagine the great surprise that was given to each of those would-be thieves, when they actually opened the suitcase and saw what was inside? They had run and snatched the suitcase looking for happiness, but all they found was a dead animal.

Paul's words to Timothy in our second lesson today does urge us to run, but not to run after happiness per se, only to be disappointed in the end! Here Paul reminds us **(1) To run away or to "flee" from the love of money;** and **(2) To run towards, or "pursue" righteousness**—the kind of righteousness that God is willing to give to every one of us by his grace through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, who died to bring us the forgiveness of sins, and rose again—to fill us with nothing less than his very own life!

"Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (I Timothy 6:12)!

St Paul doesn't tell Timothy that the people who are rich and wealthy in his congregation are somehow at a great disadvantage spiritually compared to those people in the congregation who, quite truthfully, just doing their best to barely scrap by—as we sometimes, say! No, Paul is telling them to not misplace their trust in the money they possess. Paul says: "As for the rich in this age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, WHO RICHLY PROVIDES US WITH EVERYTHING TO ENJOY. THEY ARE TO DO GOOD, TO BE RICH IN GOOD WORKS, TO BE GENEROUS AND READY TO SHARE, THUS STORING UP TREASURE FOR THEMSELVES AS A GOOD FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE, SO THAT THEY MAY TAKE HOLD OF THAT WHICH IS TRULY LIFE—ETERNAL LIFE.

This reminds us of God's greatest promise. You have eternal life through Jesus Christ! Paul doesn't want you to think that you take hold of this life because of your strength and striving or because of your choice and effort. So he adds, ***"To which you were called."***

Through Baptism God called you. Through his Word he called you. We didn't have the power to follow the call. We were dead in sin. But the Lord's gracious calling made us alive. Just like when Jesus called dead Lazarus out of the tomb, all the power and glory belonged to Jesus who called, not to Lazarus who was raised from the dead. So also, when you were called through Baptism and the Word you were raised from being dead in sin, you were raised to eternal life. Take hold of eternal life! Amen