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A few months ago, a section of the *Chicago Sun Times* Sunday edition bannered the headline “Promise of a New Dawn.” The article that followed described a new model Rolls Royce with a starting price of \$340,000 (no, there are no accidental extra zeroes there). It’s already sold out through the 2017 model year. That machine, essentially nothing more than a combination of four tires, an engine, two doors, seats, a steering wheel and gas and brake pedals, could easily stand in as today’s equivalent of the ivory inlaid couches that made Amos cry out in grief and anger in today’s first reading.

Today’s Liturgy of the Word opens with Amos quoting God, crying out, “Woe to the complacent.” Even with all the drama of hearing God shout, the last word is the key. The real tragedy Amos sees around him is complacency. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with going to a good party — Jesus was famous for enjoying them. The trouble was that for these people, feasting had become their life, and they didn’t perceive the misery that was all around them. As Amos lamented: “They are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph!”

The crux of Amos’ problem was that he had hopes for something different, something that would break the cycles of blindness and consumption. He wanted the comfortable to get a real sensual appreciation of the misery around them, but they

were smart enough to avoid it because they knew it would nauseate them. It would have been as sickening as catching a drift of the aroma permeating an underpass-made-dormitory by the homeless. It would have been as disturbing as contemplating a couple of 13-year-old girls walking through their inner-city neighborhood, a segregated urban subdivision peppered by broken windows and abandoned houses; trash and bullet-littered parks, and burned-out street lights. It would have been as disgusting as the idea of drinking the water of one of our major rivers. Such experiences are enough to ruin anyone's appetite. So the complacent avoided them.

Complementing Amos' protest, we hear Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus would have fit perfectly in the scenes described above if he hadn't been able to stake out a place in front of the mansion. One sees the advance of our civilization; now we have gated communities and vagrancy laws. The rich man in Jesus' story had to learn to look the other way, but our urban planning has made it possible to speed right past Lazarus' neighborhoods on the interstate highways. Nevertheless, the result is the same: Then or now, Lazarus remains invisible.

Knowing that, Jesus decided to tell a ghost story to disturb our peace. He addressed it to the upright of the upright, the Pharisees, folks equivalent to the pillars of the parish, the clergy and religious. After setting the scene by describing the gross inequality we've all learned to ignore or live with, he went on to say the unspeakable: Everyone, even you and I, absolutely everyone is going to die. The time is going to come when we can't change things, when there can be no more revisions to our story.

Then, weaving a narrative that would later inspire Charles Dickens, Jesus told a tale from places beyond the grave. There was Lazarus, luxuriating in the love he had always deserved, while the once wealthy, now dead man had to raise his eyes to get even a glimpse of it. As if for the first time, the rich man almost saw him. But what he really saw was not Lazarus, but what Lazarus *had*. The rich man had allowed his humanity to become so impoverished that even after dying he remained blind, insensitive to the connections that bind everyone and everything together. Unable to escape his paradigm of power relations, he begged for pity from Abraham, assuming that he was still influential enough to be sent a servant. All he accomplished by that was to deepen the chasm he had created between himself and others. His final gambit, "Send him to warn my brothers," was nothing more than an extension of his sense of class and hereditary privilege. Moses and the prophets were there for everyone to know. No amount of fright from the realm of the dead, no

threat, is capable of teaching one to love.

What is necessary is a change of the vocabulary that tells who we are. We have to learn to speak lovingly of “you” and “we” instead of just “me.” Our concept of “ours” must grow beyond the narrowness of clan and class to include those to whom the Creator refers as “mine.” When that happens, death will appear as a promise instead of a threat, and we’ll not be content until that promise comes true in the real new dawn.

### **AMOS 6:1a, 4-7**

We might read the selection from Amos as if it were an exposé done by an investigative journalist. He paints a picture of consumption so conspicuous that it becomes a caricature of itself. The “bed of ivory” describes the precision inlay work decorating the diners’ lounges and couches. (Since the tusks of elephants and hippopotami were notably absent from Israel, that was pretty expensive, imported décor.) In a place surrounded by the hungry, these revelers feast on livestock specially raised to be tender and juicy. Then, like a bunch of sloppy drunks, they start making music, thinking they rival David himself. They are the sort of whom the apostle speaks: “You fatten your hearts for the day of slaughter” (James 5:5).

Amos started this section out saying, “Woe to the complacent!” This was not a curse, but a funeral dirge. Amos made no bones about it. These people were willingly, wantonly digging their own moral graves. In a very real example of how the first would become first-in-the-worst, he predicts that the wealthy leaders will head up the procession into exile.

It is vital to remember that their sin was complacency. The fate of Israel, especially the fate of her poor, was outside their realm of concern. It’s really the stuff of characters like Narcissus and Midas; their stories are myths that communicate truths applicable to all times and places. If Amos were here today, he’d probably be marching through our cities with a scroll of *Laudato Si* in his hand. He’d be one with Francis, crying out, “The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she groans in travail.” Like Francis, he would hammer home the truth that there is an “intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet ... everything in the world is connected” (*Laudato Si* #2, 16).

The tragedy that Amos lamented was that the powerful of Israel did not remember that truth. They thought they could revel freely while others languished. But like those who abuse the earth, as they refused to see the needs of others around them, they were subverting the stability of their society. It could not stand, and as Amos warned, they became the first to be mocked and led into exile.

Perhaps the major difference between them and us is that our stakes are higher. They faced being handed over to a more powerful enemy. We are the most powerful; therefore the destruction we can achieve is worldwide. Woe to us if we remain complacent!

## **1 TIMOTHY 6:11-16**

Last week's selection from 1 Timothy led us to reflect on how and why to pray. This week's reading looks at how to live the Christian vocation as a challenge to grow constantly in grace. The title "man of God" is a traditional way of referring to a prophet, and so we might hear what follows as a description of how to live out our baptismal call to be prophets.

When Paul says to "pursue" righteousness, etc., there's an implicit indication that living those virtues will never be a *fait accompli*, but rather is a process designed to last a lifetime. That makes for an interesting interplay of ideas when followed by the directive to "lay hold of eternal life." Eternal life in this context is not some future reward for having succeeded at the prophetic vocation. It is something that is here and now as well as in the future. Putting those ideas together, we might well conclude that living the virtues Paul recommends will lead to the experience of the reign of God among us.

This reading invites us to meditate on each of the virtues mentioned — a sure week's worth of prayer with six virtues to consider before the next Sabbath. The first mentioned is righteousness, which is perhaps an unfortunate translation for what we might call justice carried out with humility. If we want an example, we could turn to Joseph, whose "righteousness" is explained as he faces the dilemma of what to do with a wife whose pregnancy is a surprise to him. The second in this list is translated as "devotion" or "piety" or even "godliness," which indicates that the concept is deeper than a single word can convey. It is often connected to fear of the Lord or awe in the realization of God's majesty. In that context we can understand "devotion" as the loving response that flows from every experience of God's

greatness.

The next on the list is faith, which does not refer to a creed but a way of life so trusting in God that our constant goal is to discern and follow God's will. That activity will inevitably lead us to love. Christian love is seen in its effects; it brings about the good of others, be they friends or not. Almost as a way of concretizing the expressions of love, the apostle calls Timothy and all the baptized to take on attitudes that reverence others: patience and gentleness. The two make good companions, as each may help us grow in the other and teach us to respect those who are different from ourselves even as we give ourselves room to grow. Finally, reiterating the idea that living like this is a process, the apostle calls us to compete well for the faith; in other words, remember you are called to grow until the day of your death.

After this list of virtues to live, the reading continues in what some believe is an ordination exhortation. It reminds us that the testimony of the prophetic life makes us imitators of Christ, who was the one who testified in the moment of persecution and is the one who is to come in ways we can never imagine but only anticipate with hope.

### **LUKE 16:19-31**

To get in the mood of this Gospel passage, it might help to review Whoopi Goldberg in the movie "Ghost." Just as she saw (and shared with us) the scene of some pretty gruesome life and post-death experiences, Jesus uses down-home life-and-death images to convey his message.

While we picture Lazarus lying in the driveway, we can almost hear the rich guy's steaks sizzling on the grill and the pop of the cork of a bottle of \$150 Veuve Clicquot champagne. It's hard to imagine what might go through Lazarus' mind as he watched a UPS truck deliver a Gucci "Bee web wool silk scarf" that costs \$295 before shipping and handling. (Check it out, they're advertised on the web!) Sound bizarre? That's simply today's version of the picture Jesus paints for us.

His point is to make us gasp. Jesus wants us to be shocked and disturbed and to remember that the scene he describes has been repeated in every generation from his to our own.

Such disproportion impels us to ask what to do about it. We look at history and see that revolutions accomplished very little. The French took off a lot of heads, the communists even tried to eliminate remembrance of God, but none of it has solved the problems of inhuman inequality and indifference.

Perhaps what Jesus was saying about the nameless rich man was that he had created his own world; he had written his story, and it turned out to be a tragedy written in gold. When we hear the story, the multiplicity of vivid details can obscure a key element. Abraham told the dead man that a chasm had been established that prevented people from crossing between one side and the other. Isn't it possible that the rich man and his family and friends had been the architects of that chasm?

The dead man had spent years in power on earth. In that time, he had obviously done quite well and enjoyed the best he had ever hoped for. And that was precisely his problem. The hopes and achievements that may have once appeared so large were actually so puny in scope that in the end, there was only room for him and his chosen few. He refused the knowledge that the table he set would be his forever. He had closed himself off from Abraham and those he would welcome to his bosom and abode. Moses and the prophets had warned him, but he kept his doors secured. He locked himself into his own little world, and while that may have been fine for a few years, it didn't take long to realize that it was going to be an eternal inferno.

In our reading from 1 Timothy, Paul introduced us to the idea that the Christian life is one of continual growth in the love that creates community. That process is what gives us the foretaste of eternal life. This week's scriptures are vivid portrayals of the importance and ultimate joy of finding ways to feast today with everyone God is going to receive into the eternal banquet.

## **Planning: 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** *Lawrence Mick*

If you didn't know better, you might think that the Lectionary was designed so that these readings would be proclaimed to us shortly before the national elections in the United States. Over and over this year, we keep hearing passages from scripture that apply directly to issues at stake in the election.

Of course, part of the reason for this dynamic is that we are in Cycle C of the Lectionary, which relies heavily on the Gospel according to Luke. Luke's Gospel shows a strong concern for the poor and the weak in society, so hearing that Gospel through this year naturally puts Gospel values up against the values espoused by various candidates and political parties.

Both last Sunday and today, the first reading comes from Amos, who is not subtle when he condemns those who live in luxury while the poor suffer. Last week's passage was more explicit about the exploitation of the poor, while this Sunday's selection focuses more on the indifference of the wealthy toward the state of the country. Most people who gather for worship will not recognize themselves as actively cheating the poor (though many in the business and financial worlds should!), but most of us fail often by indifference to the needs of those around us.

The Gospel today is not subtle either. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus surely challenges our whole society, as Pope John Paul II made explicit during his first visit to the United States. "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom, if, in any place, the Lazarus of the twentieth century stands at our doors" (homily at Yankee Stadium, Oct. 2, 1979).

It is a challenge for preachers and planners to address this issue in a way that might break through all the defenses that parishioners have constructed in their minds to justify the radical inequality that marks our world and even our own country. Even when Pope Francis speaks on this topic, many Catholics call him a socialist and dismiss what he says. But that does not give us permission to ignore the issue or to water down the Word of God.

At the same time, raising the issues does not have to sound as condemnatory as Amos; aim to challenge more than condemn. For example, consider intercessions today for workers denied a living wage, for those abused by wage theft, for those whose possessions blind them to the needs of others, for those who value wealth over love of God and neighbor, for those trapped by their own possessions, that when we vote, we will consider how to shape a society that cares for the poor.

## **Prayers: 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

## **Introduction**

Sometimes our readings are full of good news; sometimes they abound in hard warnings. Today we are warned that we need to be attentive to the opportunities around us to serve others. It's easy to postpone for another day the steps we need to take. Trusting in God's ultimate mercy is only half the story. Today may be the only time we have to respond.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you warned the Pharisees of the dangers of ignoring the poor: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you reminded them of the prophets of old: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you called them and us to be people of compassion: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Brothers and sisters, let us turn our attention and prayers to all the many needs of this world.

**Minister** For the church: that we may remember our calling to be a church for the poor ... we pray,

- For peace throughout the world and across our nation as we prepare for a contentious election ... we pray,
- For eyes, ears and hearts that recognize and respond to the needs of others ... we pray,
- For those who prick our consciences and refuse to let us off the hook ... we pray,
- For those who organize local, national and international responses to those in need; and for those who support them financially ... we pray,
- For those whose lives are lived on the streets, in alleyways, in substandard housing, in shelters or in refugee camps ... we pray,
- For children attending inferior schools and those struggling to help them learn and succeed ... we pray,
- For those we support through our parish ministries; for the sick and dying among us; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,



**Presider** God who demands justice for the oppressed, we pray for the compassion, courage and generosity to see and respond to those who need our help. Do not allow us to be callous or complacent, for we long to be your righteous people. We ask these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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