

"JUDGED BY THE POOR"

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, CA
September 25, 1983
Luke 16:19-31, Amos 6:1-7

The Scripture lessons for last Sunday and for today are disturbing. They make me uncomfortable. One of the advantages of following the lectionary -- the assigned, suggested readings -- is that the preacher is forced to look at passages that are uncomfortable. It is easier to preach one's pet ideas, or what the preacher thinks the people would like to hear. But, the message of the Word is thereby ignored. The message of Amos and of Jesus' story in Luke today is clear: we are judged by the poor. We are judged by how we treat others, especially those who have little political or social influence.

Jesus told of two men: one was rich, lived in splendid quarters, dressed expensively and feasted sumptuously; the other was poor and ill, a beggar, who was taken every day to sit at the rich man's door, living out of the garbage can. He was full of open sores which the dogs would come and lick.

When the two men died, the poor man, named Lazarus, was taken to heaven and rested with Abraham. The rich man ended in hell - the fiery place.

The message was clear. The rich man was told, "In your lifetime you were given the good things, while Lazarus got the bad things." The rich man was judged by the poor. He was judged on the basis of his treatment of Lazarus, the poor man.

Amos, the prophet, was equally strong in his warning of judgment. The wide disparity between the rich and poor in Israel was bringing God's judgment on the land. The rich were ignoring the poor, enjoying their own advantages, exploiting the poor, and oblivious to the word of the Lord. In our text today, Amos 6:1-7, Amos cried, "How terrible it will be for you that have such an easy life in Zion and for you that feel safe in Samaria...You refuse to admit that a day of disaster is coming, but what you do only brings that day closer. How terrible it will be for you that stretch out on your luxurious couches, feasting on veal and lamb... You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest perfumes, but you do not mourn over the ruin of Israel." How terrible it will be for you, he cried, because you shall be judged by the poor, judged by how you treat the poor, judged for the vast chasm between the rich and the poor.

This is an uncomfortable theme, for you and I are among the rich. You may not consider yourself wealthy, but compared to most of the world, we live as the rich. As a nation, we are wealthy, with much of the world lying at our doorstep, looking for handouts, searching the garbage cans. There are too many people on this earth, too many mouths to feed and a scarcity of resources. The United States is 6% of the world's population, yet we consume 50% of the world's resources. That is disparity. Besides that, we waste. We fill the air with poisons. We affect the weather. We pollute the water. We explode ferocious weapons under the earth, tampering with balance. We hoard, stockpile food and pay farmers not to farm, while the world starves. How long before we are judged? Has God blessed us so abundantly so that we can live in luxury while Lazarus lay at the door?

Notice that the rich man's judgment was not because he was an evil man or did evil acts. Unlike the rich in Amos' preaching, the rich man in Jesus' story did not exploit Lazarus, or cheat him, or sell him into slavery because he couldn't pay his debts, a common occurrence in the time of Amos. No, the rich man was not necessarily an evil man. He was judged because he did nothing. He knew nothing of Lazarus. He ignored Lazarus. He didn't care about Lazarus. He basked in his ignorance.

Not only did Jesus teach that we will be judged by the poor, but Jesus identified himself with the poor. In his parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, Jesus said, "Depart from me, you that are under God's curse. Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels. I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me." Then they will answer, "When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we would not help you?" "I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me." We see Jesus in the poor, in the least important ones.

What does Jesus look like? Artists for centuries have tried to portray Jesus. I have a painting where the artist portrays Jesus with a strong jaw, determined, handsome. Italian painters portray Jesus as an Italian. Sallman portrays Jesus as a blonde, effeminate Swede. What does Jesus look like? Does anyone know? Yes, we know what Jesus looks like. Jesus looks like the face of a gaunt, bony, starving child with swollen abdomen. Jesus looks like the elderly person trying to survive solely on Social Security. Jesus looks like the 200,000 persons who live on the streets in Calcutta. Jesus looks like the Laotians who awam the river at night, taking with them only what they wore, to escape the slaughter by Communists, and are now refugees in our midst. Jesus looks like the Americans who eat dog food. One million persons, 225,000 households in America use dog food in the diet. That is what Jesus looks like, and as the least important ones are treated, so is Jesus treated. Jesus identified himself with the poor, and we are judged by the poor.

Judgment. Someone has said, "A society is not judged by how it treats its best people, but how it treats its worst." John F. Kennedy may have made that statement, I'm not sure, but he did say in his inaugural address, "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." That is truth. For we are inextricably bound with one another. No one race, no upper class, no one country, can long survive without the others. Our nation has made tremendous advances in its treatment of the emotionally disturbed, nandicapped, and retarded. We welcome refugees. And we have been blessed. Let us continue and expand the concern.

Perhaps the word "judged" is disturbing or confusing you. If you don't like the word "judgment", substitute "true nature". The true nature, the true character of a nation is revealed in how it treats the poor. Your true nature, your true character, is revealed, known, evidenced by how you treat "the least important ones".

A nation is judged not by its suburbs, but by its ghettos. A teacher is judged not by how s/he relates to the brilliant and the motivated student, but by how s/he relates to the slow, the unruly, the one with learning difficulties. A church is judged not by its fine buildings, balanced budgets, fat clergy, marvelous choir, modern educational programs, but by its ministry, its concern, to the poor, the disadvantaged, the discouraged, the exploited.

The rich man experienced judgment as torment in a fiery place. He cried out to Abraham for relief. "Have mercy on me," he cried. "Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame." But Abraham could do nothing. Lazarus could do nothing. Because, said Abraham, "Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are." There is a point of no return. There is a point at which the clock cannot be turned back, when the process of judgment is in motion, and it cannot be stopped. Amos said Israel was in such a place, and Israel was destroyed. There is a point of no return. That is what is sobering. When that point is passed, we are in ignorance. We can't hear. We can't see. We live in a dream world.

Then, the rich man, after learning that he had passed the point of no return, that he could not return and do it over, nor could Lazarus come and help him - begged Abraham to send Lazarus to the rich man's family and warn them. Abraham cynically, but realistically, replied, "They won't listen." "They haven't listened to Moses and the prophets." The rich man cried, "But, they might listen to someone who has returned from the dead." "No," said Abraham. "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

America, will you listen? Will we listen? Can we hear? America, can we hear before it is too late?

Church of Jesus Christ, can you hear? Will you hear Amos, Jesus? My vision of a church is a group of people who recognize their own needs, who realize their imperfection, who gratefully depend upon the grace of God for their salvation and not on their own merits or works, and therefore are careful in their judgment, assessment and treatment of others. My vision of a church is that such a group of people are then totally committed to Jesus Christ, open to the Holy Spirit, responsive to one another in love, outreach, caring; and together as a church dedicated, devoted to the poor, the mistreated, victimized, a church where they are welcome, a church that ministers to them, speaks out for them, leads the way in reversing the ways of the world. That is a church that hears the gospel.

We are judged by the poor. We see Jesus in the poor. Our true character is evidenced in how well we hear and respond.

"J U D G E D B Y T H E P O O R"

LUKE 16:19-31, AMOS 6:1-7

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