

"Godliness with Contentment"

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

September 30, 2007

I need to begin by thanking the thoughtful folks that run across some good stories and send them to me through the modern marvel of email. I really loved the story of a young girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said that, even though a whale is really large, it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because its throat was very small. The girl, having been faithful in her Sunday School attendance, objected stating that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher made it clear that she did not believe those stories because it was physically impossible. The girl said, 'Well, when I get to heaven, I'll ask Jonah' The teacher asked, 'What if Jonah went to the other place {hell}?' The little girl replied, 'Then you ask him '.

It is easy to get caught up in a parable like the one found in today's Gospel. A rich man no name given, - - - it is so interesting to note those subtle details. A rich man - one who was probably the talk of the town. Probably he was the envy of all of his neighbors - I suspect that they all longed to get close to him. He was so rich that he only wore the most expensive clothes, right down to the linen underwear - he had it all. Still Jesus does not even give him a name. And when he dies - even though we could imagine a lavish funeral, all Jesus could muster to tell us is that he was buried. Then there was Lazarus - a beggar - covered in sores - longing for bread crumbs but the dogs got them before him. He dies and, with name intact, is carried by angels to heaven. A rich man left alone and tormented - and a poor man named Lazarus - winging his way toward the streets of gold in the presence of God.

Great stuff - great set-up. But what is the message? What is the word of God in this for us? It would certainly be easy to take the easy route of the root of all evil stemming from the love of money - it is a good Biblical message shared in our second lesson. We could well talk about how easily we fall into the trap of loving money - it happens to all of us. And perhaps that is a good lead into another email I received this week. It was the story of two men who crashed in their small plane on a small, remote island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They both survived but they were stranded. One of the men quickly made a search of the island and returned to report that there was no food and no fresh water anywhere - they would

quickly begin to starve and slowly die on that remote island. The second man seemed totally unconcerned. When confronted for the first man who was panic personified, the at ease man said that he was not worried because he earned \$250, 000 per week. The first man went crazy. What possible good would all of that money do them on an isolated island with no food or water? The second man tried to calm the other and went on to say that he was a member of the Lutheran Church and he was a tither. Very calmly he added, "If I'm missing, my pastor will find me!"

Yes, to say that we all fall into the trap that the love of money can become very seductive and lead to evil would be easy. But is that really the heart of what Jesus wants us to hear today? It is great stuff - could work well to encourage a little furnace fund giving. But it seems to me that God's word calls us deeper today. We could talk about the torment of separation from God and the joy of being carried into His presence. That would be a good theme. The one that I really like would deal with the 5 brothers of the rich man who had not heard or responded to the message. They have Moses and the Prophets, Jesus says - they have the scriptures. And then Jesus goes the step further to say that even if someone would rise from the dead, some people would not respond. I wonder if Jesus was thinking about His own death and resurrection and how many would not even accept that as enough proof to change their lives. I find myself consumed with the image of the rich man in his fancy clothes 'feasting sumptuously' yet, seemingly unaware of Lazarus lying at his gate. The first scripture lesson shares that theme - a nation that had become so self indulgent that they lay on ivory laden beds drinking wine by the bowlful while many suffered - Lazarus, right there at their gates, but it was as though they do not even notice.

Some years ago - before the death of Mother Theresa, a television special depicted the grim human conditions that were a part of her daily life. The article that I read said that it showed all the horror of the slums of Calcutta and her love for those destitute people. The producer interviewed her as she made her rounds in that dreadful place. The article went on to tell that throughout the program, commercials interrupted the flow of the discussion. Here is the sequence of the topics and commercials: lepers (bikinis for sale); mass starvation (designer jeans); agonizing poverty (fur coats); abandoned babies (ice cream sundaes) the dying (diamond watches).

Our second scripture lesson this morning begins with a powerful line. It tells us that "there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment." Personally, I think there is so much for us in two of those words - godliness & contentment.

Godliness calls us out of ourselves and reshapes us in the image of God. Godliness is wrapped up in actions of grace, mercy, love, forgiveness,

compassion, and the like. Godliness calls us to turn our hearts and minds away from ourselves and toward another. If we could move our lives more and more toward godliness, I believe that we would find more and more contentment. The difficult thing is that our world has exactly the opposite plan. Our world is built around being discontent. We should be able to sit there on our plush couches in the evening after a long and difficult day and be reminded that we really should have designer jeans on while enjoying an ice cream sundae - and when we check the time we really deserve to have some diamonds on our watches. You don't have all that? You should!!! you'd look good in a new fur coat and you better get that body in shape for the new bikini - you should have it all. And when we don't we become more focused on us and what we should have and what we deserve - who could possibly have the time to notice Lazarus lying at our gate. I have said it many times - one of the hardest things that we face is our lack of contentment - and how can we ever be content when everything around us tells us to focus on ourselves - who even notices Lazarus lying at our gate anymore.

I suspect that one of the worst feelings in the world is to be really discontented - totally unhappy with one's life. Yet, it is my belief that it is God's great desire that we be content. It is not easy in our world as it becomes increasingly hard to put bread on the table for many and yet we are continually confronted with the message that we should be able to have it all. God's word calls us to combine godliness with contentment - it calls us to turn our attention on another rather than just on ourselves. It calls us to remember the life of Christ that God gave to us / for us and have our thoughts reshaped. Paul told Timothy to "Pursue, righteousness, godliness, faith, love, gentleness; fight the good fight of faith and hold on to eternal life." I believe that therein a new contentment lies. Eternal life - gift from God - let us walk with God - and one day we can ask Jonah about the whale.

AMEN