

TEXT: Lectionary readings
THEME: Real life is life shared
SUBJECT: Life that is really life
TITLE: Real Life

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
29 September 2019
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

If the gospel readings for the last several weeks haven't challenged common conceptions of Christianity, today's certainly does. It addresses the widening gap between rich and poor that threatens the peace and stability of any society, ancient or modern.

Amos sets the stage for our hearing of Luke. Amos is a farmer who is sent with a message for the one percent of Israel. Amos concentrates his main indictment against the elite upper-class circles of Samaria, the *crème de la crème*. Their bed frames are inlaid with ivory, they dine on chateaubriand and drink wine by the bowlful.

"Woe, you complacent in Zion. . ." begins Amos. This text is full of sarcasm. These elite leaders, who deem themselves the "choicest" will continue to maintain their "choice" position at the head of the exiles. They are the ultimate cause of the ruin of the nation, therefore they shall be "honored" by being the first in judgment as well. Their winning will give way to whining.

By the middle of the 8th century BCE, Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. This prosperity led to gross inequities between urban elite and the poor.

Through manipulation of debt and credit, wealthy landowners amassed capital and estates at the expense of small farmers. The smallest debt served as the thin wedge that lenders could use to separate farmers from their patrimonial lands and to deprive them of personal liberty.

Within a few decades of Amos' prophetic activity, Israel was invaded by Assyria and Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, was captured in 722. Israel saw devastation and destruction which made Amos' foreboding words all the more sobering.

Enter, stage left, Jesus. "There was a rich man . . ." Jesus clearly holds the rich man, with all his resources, accountable for the deplorable conditions suffered by Lazarus.

The rich man has created an impassable chasm between himself and the poor man; the chasm of being trapped within material pleasures; the chasm of forgetting the other, of incapacity to love, which then becomes a burning and unquenchable thirst.

We must note that in this parable Jesus is not referring to the final destiny after the Last Judgment, but is taking up a notion found in early Judaism, namely that of an intermediate state between death and resurrection, a state in which the final sentence is yet to be pronounced.

The dogs licking Lazarus' sores are not an image of comfort. These are wild and hungry dogs, impatient for Lazarus to die, anxious to make off with his bones. Lazarus suffers inconsolably while the rich man feasts sumptuously - every day, while wearing the latest Giorgio Armani.

The text does not say God comforts the poor and suffering because of their virtue. We don't know why Lazarus is destitute. Was he an alcoholic? Addicted to opioids? A ne're-do-well? Unemployed because GM closed a factory?

The text doesn't say why Lazarus is impoverished. It isn't interested in the "why," but in the reality of his poverty. It is because of his hardship that Lazarus is comforted by Abraham, the patron saint of hospitality. Lazarus' comfort is not related to the content of his character but to the context of his life.

We prefer the gospel spiritualized, devotional, pious. To such a preference Bonhoeffer asks, "Why Jesus didn't speak of Lazarus' inner attitude. Or, conversely, why doesn't Jesus speak of the condition of the soul of the rich man? Jesus did not moralize as we do; he simply described the material conditions suffered or enjoyed.

Why then, Bonhoeffer wants to know, do we have the arrogance to spiritualize what moved Jesus so deeply? Bonhoeffer concludes, "We must put an end to this insolent and hypocritical spiritualizing of the gospel. *Either take it for what it really is or hate it, but be honest about it.*"

The problem with the one percent of Amos' day and with the one percent of Jesus' day is not that they are rich. The problem is they are indifferent to the suffering of the poor. The rich man does not believe Lazarus is his brother, let alone his neighbor even though he dies at the rich man's gate.

The rich man soon discovers the gulf created by his gated community, rather than protecting him from the riff raff, excludes him from the hospitality of Abraham.

Timothy is instructed to *command* the rich (rather risky) in his congregation not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Timothy is to *command* the rich to do good, to be rich in good works, *generous*, ready to share.

The word translated "generous" more properly refers to something held in common trust or communally owned. Applied to a person it might better be translated either as "belonging to the community" or "sharing his property in common." In fact, it would probably be accurate to render the term here as "communists." (David Bentley Hart)

Timothy commands the rich to do good, to be rich in good works, communists, ready to share.

Real life is not life at the top of the heap, isolated from the rest of humanity. Real life is life in relationship, life in community, life as communion. Not a spiritualized communion of the like minded or of Christian hearts in love united, but of communion with the poor.