

My Brothers and Sisters,

This week, once again, our Old Testament reading comes from the prophet Amos. This reading focuses more on systemic injustice than on concrete injustices. Amos prophesies that the leaders of Israel will be sent into exile because of their failure to care for the needy among them.

He begins by describing their indulgent lifestyle: lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches, eating lambs and calves, writing music, drinking wine, and anointing themselves with the best oils. The key word in the passage is *complacent*. They became complacent in their lifestyles. They were not concerned with those less fortunate than themselves.

Amos's challenge to Israel is his challenge to us today. We too often are complacent although I think the pandemic and now the economy have threatened our complacency. For example, as long as our lives are comfortable, we often do not get too concerned about those struggling within our community. As long as we have our jobs, we are not concerned when others lose their jobs. As long as we can pay our medical bills, we are not concerned about those who cannot afford good medical care. We pay little attention to the problems facing people in poor countries throughout the world: lack of food, lack of water, lack of shelter, lack of medical care, lack of freedom, religious persecution, endless wars, even slavery, and the list goes on. The challenge to us is twofold: to become aware of these issues, i.e., to open our eyes and our ears, and then to do something, even something very small, to make a difference, i.e., to open our hearts.

The parable in today's Gospel is unique. It is the only parable where a character in the parable is given a name. However, it is not the rich man who is given a name, but the poor man who lay at the rich man's door covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten the scraps from the rich man's table. Although Jesus does not give the rich man a name, popular literature has given him the name Dives, which means rich man.

The parable does not tell us anything about Lazarus except that he lived in abject poverty. Nor does it tell us anything about the rich man except that he lived luxuriously. Both died. Lazarus was carried away to the bosom of Abraham, and the rich man was buried in the netherworld.

When I was younger, I thought the sin of the rich man was that he failed to care for Lazarus. However, in the context of the reading from Amos, I would suggest that his sin was that he did not even notice Lazarus. Although Lazarus was on his doorstep, he did not even notice him. Like the leaders of Israel in the time of Amos, he was complacent. He was content with his life. Like the first reading, the parable challenges us to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to those in need both near and far.

At the beginning of the homily, I mentioned systemic injustices. In discussions concerning the poor, we are often tempted to point out that many people who are poor are poor through their own fault, that there are jobs for those who want to work. However, Jesus did not make those distinctions. Nowhere did he tell us why Lazarus was poor.

The truth is that some injustices are institutionalized. In other words, no one is acting unjustly, but systems can foster injustice. Salaries are often unjust. For example, athletes and celebrities are paid disproportionately high salaries. At the same time, some hardworking, but unskilled, people are not paid enough to support and educate their family. One of our fundamental principles of justice is that workers are owed a living wage. We need to ask how we can work to change institutionalized injustice.

My brothers and sisters, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to be merciful as God is merciful, to be compassionate as God is compassionate, to be sensitive to the real needs of others, both those that are expressed and those that remain unspoken [Luke 6:36].