

16th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on September 28, 2025

Amos 6:1a,4-7 / Psalm 146 / 1 Timothy 6:6-19 / Luke 16:19-31

*We who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Amen.*

Did anyone hear about the homeless guy who won the lottery here in SLO? It was back in April. Armando Vidal bought Scratchers down the block from here at Sandy's Deli & Liquor – at Nipomo at Higuera. It was a \$1M Scratcher. What a transformation of life!

While not exactly the same, there are enough similarities between the once-homeless Armando who lives in our own town and Lazarus whom we read about in today's Gospel. Both were homeless and both were overlooked and unseen. I would go one step further to say that Lazarus, and many of the unhoused in our own community, are *disregarded*: they are actively ignored, as the Rich Man did to Lazarus.

Today, all 4 passages of scriptures underscore that the earthly power structures are the opposite of the heavenly power structures.

- Amos has quite a harsh warning for those who live opulent lifestyles.
- Psalm 146 is the Magnificat of the OT: a precursor of Mary's words that God will lift up the poor and oppressed.
- Paul emphasizes that godliness requires a heavy dose of contentment.
- And Jesus all but says '*You can't buy your way into Heaven!*'

Love of money and power are not heavenly virtues. That doesn't mean that poverty is a heavenly virtue. And these scriptures are about more than just poverty. They are about poverty brought about by unjust societal structures or personal values. And if you look closely at the scriptures, it's *faithfulness* that is the virtue.

It's interesting, because I think that most of us have conflicting views and values when it comes to wealth, power, status, poverty, prisoners, strangers or immigrants.

- On one hand, we hold in high esteem those who are successful in their careers and financially successful.
- On the other hand, we have a concern for the poor, supporting the food bank, handing out food bags and gas cards from the office.
- On another hand, we find displays of opulence distasteful, especially when coupled with an air of entitlement or privilege. Like spending a billion dollars for a 15min joy ride in your personal rocket.
- And on yet another hand, we blame the poor for their poverty. They needed to make better choices in life to avoid the situation that they are in.

I think that we would do well to really think through these various thoughts, get to the root of why we believe them, get some facts behind them, and develop views on wealth and poverty that have some integrity. It's more than just an intellectual exercise; it's a *spiritual* exercise. And today's scriptures emphasize that developing views on wealth and poverty that have integrity is a spiritual exercise because the foundation of today's scriptures is *faithfulness* to God and the care of the most vulnerable of God's people.

Today's scriptures present the opposite of prosperity gospel. Prosperity gospel being the idea that if you are faithful, God will give you riches, or if you are materially wealthy, clearly God favors you. Prosperity gospel also includes the notion that if you are poor, you are not faithful enough or God is punishing you.

Poverty is not always the person's fault. God knows that and is aware that most people who are in poverty are so because of corrupt power structures. That is why both the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus turned the model of earthly power structure upside down. Both Psalm 146 and the Magnificat praise God for overthrowing the mighty and caring for the poor and the oppressed.

We must keep in mind, though, that YHWH and Jesus don't have a problem with wealth; they have a problem with corruption, self-centeredness and oppression, actions that are very often instigated and fueled by the wealthy. And throughout history, cultures and societies have turned such corrupt power structures upside down: Labor unions, workers' rights, workplace safety laws, child labor laws, and even the overthrow of governments.

It bears repeating, that Jesus did not have a problem with wealth. He had a problem with the love of wealth, as Paul states in his letter to Timothy.

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith.

In modern times, this passage of scripture has been modified to read that *money is the root of all evil*. But it is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil. YHWH, Jesus, the prophets, and the New Testament writers, are not concerned with money. They are concerned with self-centeredness, self-interest and a lack of care and compassion for God's people.

Let's go back to this lottery winner. How did Armando get to be homeless? Now some of you will be sitting there thinking that all homeless people are homeless by their own choice and their own life choices. Mostly, that's not true. We have a really close relationship with 40 Prado, and over these 9 years I have learned a lot about the plight of the homeless. "Choice" is not at the roots of homelessness. Also, we have to take into consideration that not all homeless people live on the streets! The majority of homeless live in shelters or in their cars, and many have jobs. The majority of homeless are accessing services that will lead to them being permanently housed.

What happened to this guy who won the lottery in April is not an uncommon story for many of our unhoused neighbors. Armando suffered an injury that led to him losing his job. Navigating the healthcare system, rehabilitation, what jobs will

accommodate an injury, and the mental health problems that come with that, coupled with the cost of housing in the Bay Area are likely what made it very difficult for him to maintain his housing. He became homeless, and for whatever reason, he migrated to SLO.

I can hear some of your thoughts now: *Well, it was irresponsible for a homeless person to buy a lottery ticket. Any money should have been put toward essentials.*¹ Who gave us that right to make that judgment? Who gives us the right to judge anyone's personal decision-making? Jesus isn't condemning any personal decisions that Lazarus made; but by inference, Jesus has some choice judgment for the personal decisions that the rich man made. The rich man's decisions had implications for the lives of others, which, as a good Jew, the rich man should have known.

Let's have a look at the rich man. First of all he's unnamed. That's not unusual for people in the gospels. But it is unusual that the rich man is unnamed, and the poor beggar has a name. And this Lazarus is not the friend of Jesus whom He raised from the dead. This Lazarus is the subject of one of Jesus' parables.

The rich man lived more than a comfortable life. There's no doubt that he felt entitled to live the life that he lived based on his wealth that he gained. Did he gain that wealth himself? Or was that wealth handed down to him by his family? Was that wealth gained ethically? Or was that wealth gained on the backs of the hard work of other people he underpaid and forced into poor working conditions? Those are all things we can speculate about. But they're also things that we can consider in our own lives, with our own wealth, within our own society, and our own faithfulness.

What we do know about the rich man, which is key to the story, is that he has always known that he was to take care of the poor widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the oppressed. Now it doesn't say he's a faithful Jew. But Jesus

¹ Does winning the lottery ruin the lives of winners? www.forbes.com/sites/johnjennings/2023/08/29/debunking-the-myth-the-surprising-truth-about-lottery-winners-and-life-satisfaction/

is speaking to the Pharisees and using Abraham and Moses in this parable. So that presupposes that the figures he's using in this story are faithful Jews. So the rich man knows that he's supposed to care for the poor, but he walks past Lazarus every single day without acknowledgement. And it's only when he ends up in Hades, and he looks up and sees Abraham with Lazarus, that he feels hard done by. The tone isn't one of jealousy; the tone is one of entitlement. *How did I not get what this poor beggar got when I had a successful life on earth and had a lot of money and did well for myself?*

Jesus never questions the rich man's success and his entitlement to use his money for purple clothes (*the most expensive color back then*) and sumptuous dining. But that does not entitle him to a good *afterlife*. He got a great life while on earth! But he did not live a *faithful* life – he did not use his wealth for the glory of God. We may have some control over our earthly life, but we don't know what's going to happen in the afterlife. Because the afterlife isn't up to us. The afterlife is up to God.

Like the Rich Man, we tend to think that outward appearances determine inward qualities. I believe it to be a very common characterization of westerners. The best dressed, the nicest houses, with the best jobs, career, financial and material success, the happiest family, those are the people whose inward souls are also the most pure! It's that kind of thinking that fuels celebrity! It's why *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous* ran for more than 250 episodes!

But the poor, the dirty, the ramshackled, they do not have pure souls! They are less worthy! They are not allowed to have champagne wishes and caviar dreams.

Every one of today's scriptures turns that on its head! It's wrong, at it's always been wrong! We do not determine who gets into heaven whether by what we think they look like or what we perceive of them, whether we think they're good people or not. And if you haven't listened to Moses, and you haven't listened to Amos, and you haven't listened to the psalmist, and you haven't listened to Paul,

and you haven't listened to Jesus, you are not entitled to be in the Good Place. It's not about money – it's about faithfulness.

A couple of months ago, California Lottery gave an update on the formerly homeless lottery winner:

Now, Armando Vidal is working to secure a place to go home to, with a bed, a couple of dogs, and he also plans invest his winnings to keep the money coming in.

Good for him! It's awesome that he got a fresh start on a new life. This is *justice to those who are oppressed and food to the hungry*, as in the Psalm.

We have plenty of homeless beggars to learn from. But like the Rich Man, whose brothers and ancestors didn't listen to Moses, and to the Pharisees who didn't listen to Jesus, have we listened to Amos, to the Psalmist, to Paul, to Jesus? Have we learned enough that we will be part of giving justice to the oppressed and food to those who hunger; setting prisoners free; opening the eyes of the blind; lifting up those who are bowed down; caring for the stranger or immigrant; sustaining the orphan and widow? Or will we look up from Hades, begging that the living be warned?

To end, let me borrow from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:16