

Twentysixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Lazarus and the Rich Man

September 22, 2019

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

What is that great abyss separating Heaven from Hell, that great chasm that Abraham himself cannot cross even should he want to, that great divide that I would dare to say even God himself will not cross? It's our own free choice. God created us out of love. God created us that he might have someone to share his love with. But love is only love if it is freely given and freely received. Love cannot be forced. And so God gives us the power to frustrate God's own intention. Like the rich man in the gospel or like those condemned in the first reading, we can become so wrapped up in ourselves with our own pleasures and ambitions that we have no room for others in our life.

The rich man never really gets it. Even in Hell he can only think of himself or when pushed, his own family. Even in death, even after Abraham has scolded him for his callous disregard for Lazarus, even then it does not occur to him to ask Lazarus for forgiveness. In death, as in life, the rich man can only see Lazarus in terms of himself, in terms of how Lazarus can be of use to him. Since Lazarus was useless to him in his earthly life, he was blind to the presence of the beggar by his door. He still remains blind to Lazarus as a person in his own right. But how can he be helped by someone he does not even recognize exists?

Jesus' parable is a cautionary tale for us all. Not to allow our own self-pre-occupation and self-indulgence to blind ourselves to the needs of those living around us. Not to become so self-complacent, that we do not see the suffering of others.

Wealth is one cause for such blind self-absorption. But it is hardly the only one. Jesus' warning today does not apply only to the wealthy. Success in any endeavor can blind us to those who fail. Our desire to succeed can make us want to feel that we have nothing in common with those who fall short. Our desire to succeed can seduce us into thinking that we can, and perhaps even should, look beyond those who have fallen along the way, that their needs will only weigh us down or slow us up. But in so doing we set the stakes for our own potential failure very high indeed. For we have then decided that to fail means to deserve to be left off to the side of life, to be accounted a nobody.

More paradoxically yet, and more tragically, self-absorption can also be the fruit of failure as well. As with the rich man now in Hell, we can hurt so bad, that we can think only of soothing our own wounds. We can feel so threatened, that we can think only of protecting ourselves from further pain. We can condemn ourselves as so worthless, that we can only think of withdrawing from everyone. When we fail we can want only to run away, to disappear from view, to live in the closet. But this choice only shrinks our world, depopulates it, such that we run the risk of finding ourselves alone, hungry and thirsty staring into a deserted wasteland.

If love is the answer, love of God and love of neighbor, what does love require? Paul's second reading gives us some answers—integrity, piety, faith, steadfastness, a gentle spirit, and taking a firm hold on the love God offers us. For while God, like our sun, may dwell in blinding, inapproachable light, the light of God's love enables us to look out and see everything and everyone around us in their true colors. To see we have only to look up

and out, beyond ourselves lying or often enough, crouching in the shadows, and look towards someone else in need of what we have to offer.

In learning how to offer love to another, our own failures and suffering, can become our teacher. They can be a blessing for us rather than a curse, a grace for us, however dark. We can be saved through our failures, if only in our suffering we turn, however feebly, and reach out to our neighbor who is suffering alongside us, suffering in a way we know only too well, needing we know only too well what would be of true aid and genuine comfort. And as we extend a hand from out of our own emptiness, weakness and shame, we can find ourselves gradually becoming less self-pre-occupied, and feeling ourselves less of a nobody, for we have become somebody to someone, someone like ourselves.

Through our failures we can become like those Jesus blesses in the beatitudes, like the hungry who know how to savor a simple meal, like the sorrowful who can appreciate a good laugh, like the rejected who know what it means to find acceptance from anyone, like the poor who knows what its like to have nothing, and so are never too poor to be generous to the poorer yet in their midst.

May we reach across whatever chasms already separate us from one another, may we cross them before they become too wide for even God to bridge. May we learn to love one another, that we might become who we all aspire to be, because it is who we are meant to be, lovers, safe and secure in the embrace of our God.