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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)
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Lectionary Year C: Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

When one is famous, one is, of course, easily recognized and one can also become a hot news story for one's actions, either good or bad. Take, for example, a rock music icon like Bruce Springsteen or an athlete like Brett Favre; once you mention their names, images of them pop into our heads. As for Brett Favre, his fame has not offered him much protection from scandal (recently, at least). He is named among several persons involved in a scandal that diverted state welfare funds toward the construction of a volleyball stadium at the University of Southern Mississippi. Needless to say, it isn't easy for any celebrity to maintain his or her anonymity -- and much less so when he or she is in trouble.

In comparison, most of us seem as anonymous as the day is long, and we have the gift of blending into the background wherever we go.

But fame either permits or forces such people to live significantly different lives from ours. When we hear of the private jets, the lavish parties, and the copious consumption of drugs and alcohol, we get the impression that these folks can do more than we could ever imagine, and, most importantly, either afford it or get away with it. We like to think of ourselves as not only more anonymous but also more restrained than that, as most of us would be priced out of that kind of lifestyle. And where we would suffer serious consequences were we to become entangled with the long arm of the law, famous people just don't seem to suffer any consequences at all.

Actually, there will always be people who do things to a more extreme degree than we do (and get away with it). Those celebrities who are constantly in the news for this, that, or the other are really no different than we are; rather, it's a matter of degree. They simply have and do more than we have and do. Where we drive Chevys and Fords, they drive Rolls Royces and Bentleys; where we live in 1,500-square-foot ramblers, they live in 15,000-square-foot mansions; where we buy consumer goods, they buy corporations.

And so on and so forth...

So when we look at the things we do instead of the degree to which we do them, it becomes a bit more difficult to point at other people's sins as being somehow more severe than our own. We're tempted all the time to say things like, "Well, I'll never be as bad off as he is" as a way of making ourselves look a bit more noble or upstanding than the person who appears washed up and strung out. I don't know if that's ever been identified as a sin before, but if it has, it would be called the sin of comparison.

The Bible is a text in which the identification of sin occurs fairly frequently. In today's First Reading from Amos, we see lots of sins identified. Here, we have people lounging around, feasting on fine meats, and drinking vast quantities of wine. Now, we can very easily use a text such as this to identify someone else's sin, can't we? We don't feast on fine meats; we eat eight-dollar hamburger steaks, and only add the mushrooms and onions if we're splurging. We don't drink vast quantities of vintage wine, we drink inexpensive mass-produced beer, and some of us don't even drink that because we're in recovery!

And what about the rich man in this morning's Gospel text? He sounds just like the folks who the prophet Amos was talking about...feasting sumptuously and blissfully unaware of the poor leper who lay at his gate. But, remember that this is a parable -- a story with a little lesson in it -- and Jesus is doing something he doesn't usually do in parables. He names that poor leper. We learn that his name is Lazarus. For whatever reason, the rich man (who could've very well been someone of renown) remains anonymous, but the poor man doesn't.

Yet, interesting as that might be, there are countless ways in which we could dissociate ourselves from this parable. We are in no way similar to the rich man in purple linen and we don't have lepers begging at our gates. Heck, we don't even have gates! And, like I've already said, there isn't much similarity between the people the prophet Amos was warning and us, either, so we can brush that off, too. Our consciences are clear and we can go home now, right?

Well, not quite...

In fact, God can communicate to us through Amos and through parables just as directly as God communicated to the Israelites of the Old Testament and the disciples of the New Testament. Celebrity or commoner, ancient or modern, we are all in the same boat!

You see, these aren't texts that we can simply brush off because (for reasons mentioned) they don't apply to us. On the contrary, God, through such texts, is trying to awaken all sorts of people to their sinfulness, including us. And no, Amos isn't just giving us a mean, angry Old Testament God who has a nasty habit of unleashing his wrath on people whom he considers his spoiled,

unruly children, nor is Jesus proclaiming an arbitrary, unjust, and uncalled-for punishment for anyone and everyone. Quite the opposite is true, actually. If anything comes across as a warning in the Scriptures, it's done so out of love. In fact, the God of Amos is the same God whom we see revealed in the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and the parables of Jesus Christ give us concrete examples of the love that he calls us to show forth to all, whether the leper is at our gate or not. God, in both instances, is operating on the same premise -- love. There's a difference between laying down the law out of love and laying down the law out of sheer nastiness. Hopefully, we're able to see our God doing the former as opposed to the latter...

The decadence which Amos is attacking is not simply some undesirable behavior; he's not looking for the Israelites to start exercising instead of lounging around or to cut down on the fine meats in favor of healthier alternatives like fresh vegetables or to put down the bowls of wine and pick up some bottled water. No, it's not the behavior he's attacking, it's the indifference toward God and neighbor that these loungers display that's so troublesome.

Similarly, we can say that the rich man's sin is indifference, as evidenced by how he ignored Lazarus suffering at his gates, as well as the fate he faces in the flames of Hades. But this is not as simple as the prediction that all rich people go to hell while the poor finally receive their reward in heaven after a lifetime of suffering on earth. If you're looking for that here, you've come to the wrong place! Let's think about this another way. Jesus gave the poor man a name -- Lazarus -- thereby granting him a modicum of dignity that otherwise wouldn't have been his. Anonymous no more, he calls out to everyone, including us, and because we can now recognize him, we respond by

saying, "Lazarus, come, eat with us; Lazarus, come, and be healed." That is, I believe, what Jesus would want us to get out of this parable.

So let us not compare ourselves to anyone -- ancient Israelite, rich man in today's parable, or otherwise -- and then tell ourselves, "We're not that bad." Instead, let us look more honestly at ourselves and think of what God might be trying to do with us here. It is, indeed, easier to brush off today's texts than it is to really sit down and apply them to ourselves. But at a closer glance, we can see ways in which our indifference has us lounging around amid the persistent cries of every Lazarus who's ever come to our door. What if, for example, Amos found those Israelites lavishing attention upon their neighbors in need instead of upon themselves? What if the rich man had invited Lazarus into his home instead of leaving him out at the gate to suffer? What if, instead of lounging around, all of them were promoting the dignity and honor of people who knew neither dignity nor honor?

Let's just say that if everyone did like they should back then, the Bible would've been a pretty dull book...

But we're all guilty of the same sin -- the sin of indifference. And it's fair to say that, thanks to Amos and Jesus, we've received ample warning. Amos writes: "Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away" (6:7). Likewise, Abraham says in Jesus' parable, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25). You see, those who lavish all the attention upon themselves without giving a hoot about their neighbors will one

day find themselves with no neighbors to give a hoot about them! Someday, you might need someone to care for you, but if, in such straits, you find yourself in exile or on the wrong side of that great chasm, you might've done it to yourself. Both Amos and Jesus appear to tell us that it's possible for us to write our own tickets to our ruin.

God does not want to see us end up like this, though. That is precisely the purpose of prophetic warning -- it's for our own good! This is not the vengeance of some mean, angry Old Testament God with an attitude problem, and Jesus in the New Testament is not out to browbeat his disciples into obedience. Rather, our Scripture texts show us the love of the one God who spans all time and history revealing himself. And as we well know, love is expressed in all kinds of words -- gentle words, kind words, stern words, admonishing words -- you name it! God uses all these ways of expressing his love to us and then some.

And even from Jesus Christ, whom we regard as the ultimate expression of God's love, we hear gentle words, kind words, stern words, and admonishing words. We hear sometimes bewildering parables like the one in today's Gospel, too. But just because the message isn't necessarily "comforting" doesn't mean it isn't "loving." God's people, despite being God's people, are just as vulnerable to indifference as anyone else. Feast, revelry, wine, and song are not, as some are led to think, bad in and of themselves, but if decadence leads to the neglect of all other relationships, we're in danger -- not necessarily in danger of an early demise, but rather in danger of one day finding ourselves without relationships, in an exile of our own making, or across a great chasm fixed between ourselves and the rest.

Let us, therefore, find ourselves in fellowship with each other instead of exclusion from each other. God wants us to be able to enjoy all the blessings he has in store for us, and the simplest way to receive them is to be obedient to him. In so doing, we will find far greater enjoyment than those Israelites or the rich man ever found in their lounging, feasting, and drinking. Revelry will indeed pass away, but service to God and neighbor will be forever.

God has identified us as his children, given us names, and rescued from anonymity all those he has called us to serve. Therefore, let us not strive to be known for the sake of being known; strive instead to know the Lazarus at the gate. We might not be a famous rockstar or athlete, or enjoy the luxuries thereunto pertaining, but we most certainly can lavish our more modest gifts upon those who might otherwise pass anonymously by us.

Amen.