

Proper 21, Year C (RCL) – “*The Myopia of Wealth*”
Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31; Psalm 146
The Rev. Skip Bushee – 9/30/07

There is an old Jewish tale of a cranky and rich merchant who mentally affixed a price tag to everything. One day he visited a Rabbi, a kindly and wise man who had distilled a great deal of wisdom from his years of experience. The Rabbi earnestly desired to make the merchant realize the error of his way. After the two men had visited a short time, the Rabbi hit on an idea. He took the rich man by the hand and led him over to a window. “Now, look out of the window and tell me what you see,” he charged.

“Well, I see some children playing with a ball; I see a woman hanging out her wash; and a man working in his garden,” the merchant observed.

Then the Rabbi took him by the hand once more and led him across the room to a mirror and asked him, “Now look and tell me what you see.”

The merchant frowned and replied, “Obviously I see myself.”

“This is very interesting,” the Rabbi observed: “In the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass in the mirror is covered by a little bit of silver. And no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others, only yourself.”

This morning's lessons are all about the myopia of wealth; how wealth and the pursuit of it causes people to see only themselves and not the needs of others or of our own spiritual well being.

The prophet Amos decries the gross materialism into which his people have fallen. In particular he talks about the national arrogance this wealth has brought to the Israelites. He says, “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion...they shall now be the first to go into exile.” He tells us that if any society devotes itself exclusively to material gain and personal pleasure, that society will be like a sand castle that is swept away by the tides of history.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, we are told not to set our hopes on worldly riches, but rather the treasure that comes from doing good works. We are told to “shun all this.” The word “this” refers to the previous verse, which contains the famous quote that “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Paul may have been referring to the Pharaohs of Egypt who believed they could take it with them by having their wealth buried in their tombs. Of course, all that happened was that grave robbers eventually stole their loot.

The Gospel of Luke continues this theme with the famous story of the rich man and Lazarus. This Lazarus has no connection with the Lazarus of John's Gospel, the brother of Mary and Martha who Jesus raised from the dead. In this parable, we have the classic reversal of fortunes with Lazarus, the poor man, being carried away to be with Abraham, the father of the Israelites, and the rich man sentenced to eternal torment in Hades. This

parable was directed toward the Pharisees who believed that God blesses the righteous with material prosperity and that prosperity is an indicator of righteousness. Jesus begs to differ in the telling of this story. Abraham also refuses to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn the brothers of the rich man. Jesus' point to the Pharisees is that they have the Law and the Prophets in Holy Scripture and if they do not believe them, why should they believe someone raised from the dead. This is apparently a reference to Jesus' forthcoming crucifixion and resurrection and a prediction that the Pharisees would continue to disbelieve even after those events. An interesting side note is that the only person referred to by name in this parable is Lazarus, the poor man. God remembers the names of those who trust in his mercy.

This month marks the sixth anniversary of the murder of thousands of innocent civilians at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in a field in Pennsylvania. Like most of us, I continue to reflect on the events of September 11, 2001 and what they mean for us, both as Americans and as Christians in the 21st century. Naturally, also, I have looked for guidance from Scripture, especially in this morning's passages.

The one question that has hounded me is, "What is it that could drive 19 young men to such hatred that they would gladly, and with years of planning and premeditation, commit unspeakable acts of violence, sacrificing their own lives in the process?" Self-preservation is perhaps the strongest of human instincts and I find it difficult to understand what could drive a human being to this point. I know that much of has to do with the evil people in the world who prey on young idealists with their twisted sense of nationalism and their religious zeal. Certainly we have seen examples of this type of sacrifice in the past – consider, for example, the kamikaze of World War II.

Still I question what part we could have played in these events. What have we done as a country to make ourselves a target for this evil? Then I am reminded of the lesson from Amos and how he warns of the complacent nation basking in its wealth. I can imagine impressionable young people in so-called "developing countries" seeing the poverty and injustice around them and contrasting that with images of America, with its freeways jammed with gas-guzzling SUVs, its per-capita consumption of scarce natural resources at twice the global average, its powerful military acting as the world's policeman, and sometimes taking ill-advised actions. I can imagine how someone looking at America from this perspective would see the great skyscrapers, built far taller than practical need, as a symbol of American arrogance, a flaunting of our wealth and resources.

Is it just possible that as a nation, we have been so caught up in our pursuit of the "American Dream" that we have become a little like the arrogant nations referred to by Amos? Could it be that we have not fully heeded Paul's admonition to Timothy and have set our hopes too much on the uncertainty of riches? Is it possible that the task of brainwashing the impressionable young people of Islamic countries is made easier because we are seen as the rich man in Jesus' parable told in Luke and they take the part of Lazarus?

I am not suggesting that we should not be utterly outraged at the unpardonable acts of September 11, nor am I suggesting that we are not justified in seeking justice against the perpetrators of these evils. But I am suggesting that we examine ourselves to see what, if any, part we might have played in these events. As Jesus said, "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

I believe that as Christians, we are called to make ourselves blameless before the world. We are called to redouble our efforts to eliminate injustice and poverty, just as our Baptismal covenant calls us to do. While our government and military are seeking to pacify the breeding grounds for terrorism, we are called to find new ways of eliminating the injustice, illiteracy, hunger and poverty that plague the developing nations and create a great chasm separating them from the industrialized world, just like the chasm that separated Lazarus and the rich man. Rather than basking in our national wealth and seeking to isolate ourselves from world trouble spots, we as Christians are called to declare war on the inequalities throughout the world that have contributed to the development of terrorism. We are called to use our wealth to reach out to those places we fear and help them build schools, hospitals and sustainable farming to enable them to share in the Earth's bounty with self-respect and pride. Only then will we be able to truly win the war on terrorism.