

**“Take hold of the life that really is life!” – Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, September 26, 2010**

For the past five weeks, our Old Testament readings have come from the prophet, Jeremiah. I don't imagine that it was ever easy to be a prophet, but Jeremiah had a particularly difficult ministry: to speak to a people who were on the brink of, and then in the midst of, the devastation of the Babylonian exile. His words sound harsh out of context, and I suspect they sounded pretty harsh *in context* as well. But to the hard of hearing you sometimes must shout. Jeremiah speaks uncomfortable words that most people would rather not hear. Above all else, though, he speaks of God's broken heart, because he discerns that underneath God's anger and disappointment with Israel there is pain. Like a parent whose child has gotten off course, God is devastated by Israel's disobedience and feels the range of emotions that accompany such experiences. Jeremiah's unenviable task is to try to convey the pathos of God to a hard-hearted people.

And then today, seemingly out of nowhere, we get this bizarre real estate transaction: the purchase of a plot of land that belonged to Jeremiah's family at Anathoth. Jeremiah is in prison and the Babylonian army is in the process of besieging Jerusalem. What's going on here? Why on earth is he purchasing land at such a moment in time? *The answer is that Jeremiah trusts that beyond exile there will be homecoming. This real estate transaction is an act of hope.*

As challenging as things are right now in our society for people who bought their homes in the 1990s, now seems to be a very good time for first-time homeowners. It is always good financial advice to buy when the market is down and to sell when it's high (even if timing that is another matter altogether!) Jeremiah's situation is even more complex than our current housing crisis, however. It's more like Cuba or El Salvador or Nicaragua in the aftermath of political revolutions than the U.S. in 2010. For a contract to be binding you need laws and a stable government. After a military takeover, it is quite possible that the deed to a piece of land may no longer be worth the paper it's printed on.

So this is a very risky venture. But Jeremiah is making a statement, and putting his money where his mouth is. He knows times are tough, and that things will get worse before they get better. But he also trusts that eventually God will bring God's people home. Eventually they will re-build their homes and live in them and plant fields and vineyards. What's happening here is that Jeremiah is making a faith claim that God has not abandoned Israel. This real estate purchase is a kind of sacramental act: an outward and visible sign of his hope in the future.

Today's gospel reading is a difficult text for many of us to hear. I think in part that is because most of us identify with the middle class and what Jesus gives us, much like Jeremiah and the other prophets of the Old Testament, are the very rich and the very poor. This past week our liberation theology class wrestled with some of these same questions that today's gospel raises for us. Most of us, even when we face challenging financial situations or unemployment, have not been homeless or needed to beg like Lazarus in today's parable. We may well be scared in the current economy but when we see the poverty of El Salvador or the Dominican Republic up close it puts things into perspective. Most of us have not lived in extreme poverty, even if we come from modest backgrounds. But most of us don't consider ourselves particularly rich either. So it makes the parable a challenge to hear.

But one of the points of the parable I do think we can relate to is how easy it is to make the poor invisible in our society (or in any society) and to silence their voices. When we are financially secure—even in the middle class—the poor can become invisible to us. So in the story that Jesus

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tells, Lazarus is right at the gate outside of the rich man’s home. Still, the rich man goes through his whole life not seeing him. The poor become “invisible” as far as the rich (and even, we might add, the middle classes) are concerned. And that, I think, is where this gospel compels us, as the Church, to speak and to pay attention. It is our job to see the Lazaruses in our own world and to stand with them. That’s not an option for the baptized community; it goes to the very heart of the gospel.

Jesus will of course go even further than that when he speaks of his death and resurrection. He will tell his followers that they don’t have to go very far to see him and that if we want to find him we shouldn’t turn our gaze toward heaven but to the Lazaruses of this world: for whenever we give bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked and water to those who thirst, we do it to Him. Our own patron, whose feast we will celebrate next weekend, knew that when he kissed the lepers of Assisi he was encountering Christ himself. Mother Theresa knew that when she cared for the poor of Calcutta, it was Christ’s best disguise. All of this is to say that when we make the poor invisible, when we turn away, we fail to see Christ in our midst. The call *to see* the Lazaruses of our own time is an invitation to seek and to serve Christ himself, and that is what the gospel calls on us to do.

Today’s epistle reading, from First Timothy, seems to speak in perhaps a more immediate and perhaps subtle way to us as mostly middle class, mostly suburban people. Unlike Jeremiah’s confusing real estate transaction or the challenging words of today’s gospel, the epistle is relatively straightforward. The writer begins by saying that “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.” I think that means basically something that is very easy to understand; although not necessarily quite so easy to live. The human propensity toward envy and greed—*to want what we do not have*—is part of the human condition. But even if it is not a gift we yet possess, I think most of us could pretty quickly agree that contentment is a good thing, and that it is the antidote to envy.

The writer (most likely not Paul himself but a later disciple of Paul’s) reminds us that we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it either. It is pretty hard to debate that fact. But in fact, we often do suffer from a kind of amnesia, don’t we? We forget that whatever we have right now is in between nothing and nothing; that it’s “on loan” to us. If we have enough food and clothing then we are already more privileged than most people who inhabit the planet; the rest is gravy. Yet it is so easy for us to forget that when we are surrounded by messages that tell us we’d be happier if our house was bigger, or our car was faster, or if our clothing had designer labels on it.

The writer of First Timothy suggests that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Not money itself, notice; which as Jill pointed out last weekend is neutral, and properly understood is a means to an end. But the *love of money* is insatiable; it’s a very dangerous road to travel because there can never be enough. I’ve known people who make big salaries who are miserable, and not at all content. All of their stuff just leads to more worry and more fear.

Left on its own, if we aren’t careful today’s gospel reading by itself can leave us paralyzed by guilt. A class in the prophets or in liberation theology can have the same effect: we finally do see the poor in our society and become aware of their plight and we want to do something, but the systemic problems seem so complex and so intractable. We are tempted in our confusion to spiritualize these kinds of readings that actually challenge us to ask hard questions about the choices we make in our daily lives about what we do with our money. Guilt doesn’t lead to change and transformation so it’s easy to get ourselves stuck.

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But I think this reading from First Timothy shows us a way forward. We can work at being more content with what we have, and from there to becoming more thankful. Meister Eckhart once said that if the only prayer we ever said was “thank you” it would be enough. Gratitude is a spiritual gift that allows us to enjoy what we have, even as we become more mindful of the needs of others. We can choose which direction to look in as middle class people. We can look to those who have more than we do but in my experience that way almost always leads toward envy. Or we can begin to see that it’s a big world out there beyond Holden, and there are a lot of Lazaruses at the gate who would do anything for the leftovers we toss in the trash. That can remind us to count our blessings and to be grateful and more content. That’s not the end of the story; but from that place we become more free to make choices out of love rather than fear or guilt.

*In my experience, contentment unleashes generosity.* There is nothing worse than a rich miser; nothing worse than a person who has everything but can’t stop complaining about what they don’t have. Very often they spend their whole lives worrying about what *might* happen, while all the time remaining blind to what *IS* happening to the neighbor right in front of them who needs not their pity but their willingness to share. So the writer simply offers this advice, which I think is a word of good news to us: He says:

Listen: if you’ve got it, don’t flaunt it. Don’t be haughty. If you are blessed with financial security, just make sure you don’t misplace your hope there. Because the market can do down just as quickly as it can go up. It is therefore far too uncertain a place to put your trust. Put your trust in the God who is the Giver of all good things, and who does mean for us to enjoy life, not feel paralyzed by either guilt about what we do have or by fear of what we might lose. *Do good...be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. Store up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation in the future so that you can take hold of the life that really is life.*

Ultimately, I think, this is where all of today’s readings lead us: to the living Christ who has come that we might have life and have it abundantly; the one who calls each of us to “take hold of the life that really is life.” It would have been tempting for Jeremiah to give in to despair, sitting in prison as Jerusalem was being besieged. But he made a real estate deal that spoke to his hope that beyond even the tragedy of the exile would be new life and a brighter future. Even in the midst of difficult political and economic circumstances, Jeremiah trusted God. He took hold of the life that really is life.

So too, even as today’s gospel reading makes a stark contrast between rich and poor that may well afflict the comfortable, the deeper point underneath it is that the gospel narrative about money runs counter to our consumer culture’s promises: over and against the bumper sticker that says “whoever has the most toys at the end wins” we offer a radically different message: “let us live simply, that others may simply live.”

In a society that makes the poor invisible, we say: “look here” to behold the Christ; the One who even now calls us to take hold of the life that really is life.