

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Remedy for Indifference”

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Who here has been to Jerusalem? My first trip to Jerusalem was when I was in seminary in the mid ‘90’s. The hotel we stayed at in Jerusalem was located near the Valley of Hinnom, also known as the Valley of Gehenna. There is a bit of hyperbole over there at work when it comes the use of words like “mountain” and “valley”. The Valley of Gehenna is actually just a lovely park now that slopes down from a hotel. It was a nice hotel, but you might say the view was hell! That little park is infamous because it the site of an awful massacre of innocents in Old Testament times and so the idea developed over the years that this was where tyrants should be judged someday. Back to my story. After a long day of touring holy sites, my seminarian buddies and I were in a lounge at that hotel that overlooked this park and we collectively decided we should go down there. I don’t know who started it, maybe it was the beverages we had just consumed, but we decided to run down the grassy slope of Gehenna yelling out the seven deadly sins, anger, sloth, gluttony, etc. We had a good laugh at the bottom and then it was time to walk back up the grassy slope. As we did so we recited the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Since it was an uphill climb, we recited the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit at a much slower pace, wisdom, understanding, fortitude, you get the picture. Back at the lounge afterwards we had a conversation about how much easier it was to fall down the grassy slopes of Gehenna than to climb back out. I promised myself I would use that image in a homily someday, and so, now you have it.

My friends, no one ever wants to dwell on thoughts of hell. However, when Gospel readings like we have today come along, it provides us an opportunity to reflect on it. And it is clear from our Lord and from our Tradition that following the commandments, living the beatitudes, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and avoiding the seven deadly sins are a good roadmap for going to heaven and avoiding hell. However, the parable Jesus gives us today is very unsettling in that it is a real head scratcher to figure out what this rich man actually did to deserve going to hell. And so, let’s take a closer look.

First off, the rich man is not named in the story. The bible doesn’t give him a name and when the bible doesn’t give a name, this means this character was meant for any of us to identify with, just like John’s woman at the well, the man born blind, etc. Because the rich man is not named, Jesus is therefore inviting us to identify with him for a moment. Jesus does so for medicinal reasons because we can rightly ask ourselves, what was this man’s sin? What did the rich man do other than to live his life with the resources that were his to spend? When he spent his money on clothes, wasn’t there a tailor who got paid who then was able to feed his family? When he spent money on food, wasn’t there servants in the kitchen and merchants in the market place who benefited as well? Jesus himself spent some considerable time with wealthy people, so much so that he was criticized for it, and so we can rightfully conclude that being wealthy wasn’t this man’s sin. So, what did this man in the story do to deserve hell? What is the medicine Jesus is trying to give us here?

Here is my take. For those of you who went to Catholic school or read the catechism, you may remember that the Church distinguishes between sins of commission and sins of omission. Remember that? The rich man's sin was that he was so self-absorbed in his own life that he did not care to even notice poor Lazarus suffering at his doorstep. That was his sin. It was a sin of omission, and a glaring one at that. When Lazarus died for lack of love and compassion, the rich man didn't notice what happened to Lazarus but God noticed. God noticed. The point of our Gospel reading today is, although all of our religious disciplines and practices are important and necessary, we must really watch out for sins of omission, sins demonstrating the failure to act. After all of our necessary pious observances, we miss the whole point of these practices if we fail to love our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable around us.

That is what seems to be missing in our world more and more I think. Love for God and love for neighbor is being replaced with indifference for God and indifference for neighbor. We sometimes care more for what is going on in our handheld screens than what is going on in the beating hearts of the people around us. We can ask ourselves the question this week, who are the Lazarus' in my life right now? Who are the people I am failing to notice that simply need a kind word from me or a simple acknowledgement that I recognize their existence? They could be a neighbor, they could even be a family member, they could be someone at work or the school you attend, who are the Lazarus' in your life right now? The nature of free will is that God will not force us to love him and the people around us, we must choose that. We must choose to be loving of the people around us; even when we are confronted with an increasingly indifferent world. When we do so, when we choose to be more loving and recognize the face of Jesus in the people around us, we discover that heaven doesn't have to be that far away from this world if we choose to act. Heaven is not that far away if we commit ourselves to building heaven on earth, one act of kindness at a time and one relationship at a time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.