

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - The Church's Mission, the Poor
September 25, 2022.

The Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of God's compassion, the Gospel of the lowly being raised up, challenges us today with the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31). The parable is not meant to defame those who have worked long and hard for their financial position in life. It is not meant to dump on the rich. The parable is meant to help us recognize the responsibilities our positions in life demand. It tells us to **do something** for someone in need **instead of doing nothing!**

The parable presents three areas of concern: **blindness, isolation, and faithlessness.** **First of all, blindness.** The most terrifying statement in the parable comes at the beginning: the Rich Man is in hell. From hell he lifts up his eyes and sees Lazarus. His eyes had never met Lazarus' eyes before. Yes, the Rich Man may have noticed Lazarus in stinky, dirty clothes begging for food as the Rich Man opened his front door to greet his guests for yet another dinner party. But he never saw Lazarus as a man like himself. Even knowing he might be hungry, the Rich man didn't even give Lazarus the scraps that fell from his table. The dogs got them first. His possessions made him blind to those around him. The first time the Rich Man really saw Lazarus as a person was when it was too late, from hell. Even then, he saw Lazarus as someone he could use. How often have we ignored the people in need, people persecuted, people in war torn countries, even those in our close circle, friends and family who just need us to look at them in the eyes, give an encouraging word, a smile, a hug, a little bit of our time, a simple "How are you?"

In 1993, Steven Spielberg's movie **Schindler's List** is based on a true story of a rather mediocre Catholic businessman, Oskar Schindler, who lived in Poland during World War II. When the war started, he saw an opportunity to make money. He made friends with some German officials and worked out a deal with them to use Jewish prisoners as free labor for his munitions factory. Since he didn't have to pay his workers, he was able to rake in a handsome profit. But little by little his eyes opened to the horrors of the Nazi regime. His heart changed, and he started using his factories and his connections with German officers to save his Jewish workers from the Holocaust. He used the money he had made during the early part of the war to "buy" more and more Jewish workers, just so he could save their lives. By the end of the war he was as broke as he had been at the beginning, but he had managed to save hundreds of Jews from being massacred. In the last scene of the movie, the Germans are fleeing as allied troops approach the town where the factory is located. We see Schindler surrounded by the workers thanking him for saving their lives. But Schindler starts crying and telling them, "I could have done so much more." He holds up his gold watch, and he says, "This could have bought someone's freedom." **Every face he sees makes him think of another face that he could have saved if he had been less self-centred and blind at the beginning.**

The parable also warns us to be concerned about being isolated. We have to be careful or our possessions will isolate us from the community. It is easy for us to form the mentality that what we have is totally and only ours and that we have no obligation to others. This does not just refer to financial wealth. It refers to anything we might possess like intelligence, talents, leadership skills, etc. For example, a brilliant college student may refuse to help another student whom he or she might see as possible future competitor for law school or medical school. So the student isolates himself to hoard his intellectual gifts. He gets an A in all his courses, but he flunks life. The extreme case of those who isolate themselves to hoard their possessions is that of the miser. The miser is miserable. His possessions have taken control of him. He has built up a wall to the community and lives and dies in isolation. All that we have is ultimately God's. It flows from Him and is only beneficial to us if it leads back to Him. We are all going to be called to give an account for all that we have been given. Here we are challenged with a frightening verse also from the Gospel of Luke (12:48): **"To those who have been given much, a great account must be given."** The great American spiritual writer of the last century, Thomas Merton, wrote: **"No man goes to heaven alone."** No woman either. We all receive our salvation as members of a community, the Body of Christ, the Church and we need to follow the

lead of the universal Church. When he was named pope, the first words that Jorge Maria Bergoglio, the new Pope Francis, heard was a cardinal telling him, “ **Please remember the poor.**” So when he was welcoming the newly ordained Bishops at the Regina Apostolorum Atheneum (September 1-7 Session 1, 8-19 Session 2, 2022), he stressed the message of “**not to forget the need to be close to the poor, knowing that everything is interconnected and everything needs care on this planet.**” **Pope Francis** insists again and again that **we go to the periphery of society to encounter and accompany those who are marginalized.** Our wonderful Catholic Church continually reaches out to the poor and suffering throughout the world. The work of Caritas, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development are noted for their efficacy. It is not relevant to the Church whether the suffering are Christian or not. Cardinal Dolan from New York was once asked why the Church puts so much effort into helping those who may not be Catholic. Cardinal Dolan responded, “**We don’t help them because they are Catholic. We help them because we are Catholic.**” The Church would not be Catholic if it did not exercise its responsibility to the total community of the world. The word catholic means universal. The Church can never be content as long as one brother or one sister cries out in vain for bread or justice or love.

Along with warning us to be careful less our possessions lead us to blindness or being isolated, the parable also warns us to be careful or our possessions will lead us to faithlessness. Off the coasts of the Philippines, especially in the Sulu Archipelago, there are some coral reefs famous for the magnificent pearls that can be gathered from the oysters there. Before the twentieth century, the only way to find the pearls was to search through oysters manually gathered from the ocean floor. Pearl divers often had to descend more than 100 feet on one breath to pick the oysters. In the 1600s, the Chinese developed a more efficient method - divers would descend with a rope tied around their waist. Following the line of the rope was a long tube. One end of the tube was kept in place in the diver's mouth by an airtight leather face-mask and the other end attached to the boat. **The diver had to have faith that his partner in the boat will ensure one end of the tube remained above water. This tube enabled the diver to search longer, since he could breathe while diving. So both the diver and the partner in the boat can share the profits from the pearls they gathered. If people doing business need to have trust in each other, how much more do we need to have faith in God, instead of our possessions, to give us life in eternity.**

Brothers and sisters, being an ex-Scout leader, I think one way to make sure we don't fall into **blindness, isolation, and faithlessness** is by taking a lesson from the Boy Scouts. Every Boy Scout is committed to **keep on the lookout for an opportunity to do at least one voluntary, selfless act of service every day.** Recently, popular culture has revived this ideal under various forms. There is a movement started by Dr Chuck Wall, a Bakersfield College professor, devoted husband of 56 years, mentor, public speaker, author, craftsman and lifelong student who thrived despite losing his sight as a teen. But Wall was best known for encouraging people to be kind and also for living what he preached. In 1993, after listening to a news commentator said how many "random acts of senseless violence" were being committed every day, he assigned his college psychology students the homework of committing a "random act of senseless kindness." Thus began **the "Random Acts of Kindness" movement.** Doing good deeds appeals to us on a merely natural level. And yet, as Christians, doing a daily good deed can have a much deeper meaning, an eternal meaning. We know that life's purpose is to live in communion with God through friendship with Christ. And so, **our acts of service have a supernatural background and motivation; they are done through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ. As a result, they become channels of saving grace, windows through which God himself can reach out and touch peoples' hearts with his own love and goodness - which are much more powerful than ours.** Sometimes this happens because we actually clothe our act of service in Christian terms, and sometimes it happens without us realizing it. At the very least, committing to perform at least one voluntary, selfless, Christ-like act of service every day will save us from the **blindness, isolation, and faithlessness**, that proved to be the rich man's downfall - if he had made this commitment, he wouldn't have ignored Lazarus. And that would have made all the difference. **Who are the Lazarus in our lives?** God bless you all.

