

Minding our own business

Amos 6:1–7, 1 Timothy 6:11-19; Luke 16:19-31

When I was a child, I remember having a pair of dachshund dogs, wiener dogs we called them.

And like everybody else in the community, we fed our dogs table scraps. We couldn't afford luxury of feeding them specialized food. Actually, nobody in our community did. We heard about special food for dogs but so what... then again, I l'm not sure we had what we have today, dog food for young dogs, dog food for old dogs, diet dog food, designer dog food! Yes, there were schools for dog training, or at least a forbidden pop song said so. One of its stanzas went something like this: How happily the dogs live in the exploiter's house. You are not going to believe but there are dog [training] schools that give them education. So they don't to bite the newspapers, but the boss for years, many years has been biting the workers.

Our home dogs ate table scraps and that's all. But street dogs, well they had to fend for themselves. They ate whatever they could find. It was every dog for himself.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus, tells the story a poor man named Lazarus. He would seat just outside of some rich man's gate, hoping that the rich man might share a few scraps with him. Lazarus is so sick, he cannot compete with the local dogs, who no doubt ate whatever was tossed out the gate, and then from time to time lick the poor man's sores.

But then the rich man and Lazarus die at the same time. One is whisked away by angels into the bosom of Abraham, and the other is

buried. The intended point of the story is that the rich man ends up in eternal, flaming torment, which is not what the Pharisees, the religious people to whom Jesus is speaking, would expect. The Pharisees, in fact, spent lots of time warning people to avoid poor folk like Lazarus or risk ending up in eternal torment as someone like that would surely end up.

There, in torment the rich man's eyes are opened, but it is too late. He finds out that there is a great chasm between him and Lazarus. But on his side, he is now the beggar, begging for just a drop of water.

"Not possible," God says. "You had your chance to bridge the gap in real life, it's way too late now. You ate, drank, and were happy in your life on earth, but it is your turn to suffer the kind of neglect you showed to Lazarus while on earth." "Then go warn my brothers," pleads the rich man. "Oh, they've had plenty of warning, just like you. They had the Law of Moses and the warnings of the prophets. That should be sufficient."

"But if someone goes to them from the dead, that will get their attention and repent," pleads again. Words are not just enough, but if they see a sign, a sign, please God. "No," God says again. "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

Now, aside from the reality of what happens when a person dies, here in today's readings, we are given instructions as to how to live the way of the Lord. God had set for his people through Moses and the prophets, through his word, household rules, commandments for godly life, to experience plentifully what it means to be people of God, but somehow gaps have been created among those sharing in the household of God and those around us. So today, through the Gospel and the other readings, we

are invited and even commanded to close the gap, the gap between those who have and those who have not.

In the Old Testament and the Gospels, we see that our God has a special concern for those who are oppressed, in prison, hungry, sick, disabled, widows, orphans and strangers, those are ones on the other side of the gap, those who are not at all like us. Amos in the Old Testament calls them Joseph.

And the way God leads us to care for all these people is for the people of God to reach out and welcome all these folks like Lazarus into the household of God, it is to take care of the Josephs in our midst, to care for them through the ministries of feeding, healing, and reaching out. That should be the business that we need to be minding.

Amos preaches to the people these words: “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria . . . but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (vv 1a, 6b).

This is a reminder of what happens when sin corrupts people’s desire for God and others. It happened to ten brothers who out of jealousy because of their father’s favoritism toward Joseph (Gen 37:4), sold him into slavery to suffer. Even when Joseph pleaded with them not to, they didn’t care. The brothers considered themselves first, caring for their own needs. They ignored their brother’s needs. Woe to these brothers!

That’s the picture Amos paints to his hearers in his message. That in their desire to enjoy the pleasures of life, their neighbors, the Josephs around them were getting neglected. “Woe to those who . . . are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” Woe to those who live by themselves. Woe to those who leave Lazarus be, at their gate uncared for. “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the

mountain of Samaria.” Like the rich man and Joseph’s brothers, Jerusalem and Samaria in Amos’s day considered their needs first. They were living in luxury. Amos described this lavish life in vv 4–6 of our text: “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils.”

We are given reminders and a warning: Woe to the rich who like to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, who eat and drink and sing and feed their pets better than they do Lazarus. Who ignore the ruin of all those in the land who are without resources. Who ignore the tragic circumstances of all those people in this world who do not have a pair of shoes, or can’t afford school for their children, or can’t afford even food. Ignore all of that and you will be the first to be sent into exile, says Amos, or eternal torment, says Jesus, because selfishness is evidence of sin.

Paul instructs us: “As for the rich of this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches in this world, but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed!”

That is, remember where everything you have comes from: a loving and generous God. Be just as loving and generous with others, especially the poor, the broken, the marginalized others.

Now we do not ordinarily identify ourselves as being rich. We find it difficult to identify with the rich man in this story. We do not know rich, we tell ourselves. This warning is obviously meant for someone else.

But that is precisely what the rich man thought. By global standards, however, if you have more than one pair of shoes, more than one pair of underwear, and more than one meal a day, you are rich.

By North American standards, if I live above the official poverty line, I am part of the over consumer class. If I have breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I am rich like the man in the story.

But if I think I earned all these blessings I have, that I deserve it all, that it is mine to do with as I please, then, says Jesus, Paul and Amos, remind us to think again, because really, I might be poor. Might as well say, I am living in exile; far away from those in need in real need. Far away from all the brothers and sisters and children and grandchildren of Lazarus throughout the ages for whom our God has a special love and concern. It is like the Scripture says: there is a deep gap between us. And that gap, experts in the matter say, is getting deeper and deeper every day.

But Jesus says "Mind my business! The business of God's Kingdom! Mind also the gap! What are you going to do about it? The gap has become so great that there is no middle ground. It's so deep you can't get over it. If you want to be in the bosom of Abraham, in heaven, then there is no time to wait.

You have a multi-billion-dollar industry to feed your pets. You use designer underwear. You have closets full of shoes. Pantries groaning with food when I taught you to pray for daily bread. What about my people? What about all those people whom I died for?

Mind the gap Jesus says. But how are we to mind the gap? At the begging of our Gospel reading, we are told that the rich man has a gate. And Lazarus and all he stands for lies just on the other side of that gate. Now gates can keep people out, but also keeps people inside. Gates can be used to separate us from others. If so, then we need to identify the gates that separates us in the community.

Gates can keep some children from ever achieving finishing their education, for example. Gates can be used to keep middle- and low-income housing out of neighborhoods so that their properties don't devaluate. Gates can be used to send homeless people to motels in other communities just to keep them out of some areas. Gates can be policies that make entrance into our neighborhood impossible for the kinds of folk we would rather not see day to day, and more.

But gates can mark a point of connection. Gates can lead us from our own self-concerned, self-centered lives into the world of others. Gates can allow us to enter the bigger world around us. Gates can allow us to meet those people God in Christ cares most about: the children and grandchildren of Lazarus the Josephs of our time; if we will only open the gate and step out.

Jesus tells a story for all who will listen. "Mind the gap," he says. In this story he issues an invitation to narrow the gap by opening the gates and stepping forth to minister to those people he loves and cares for; those people to whom he was sent in the first place.

But "inside the gates," he says, "will be all the treasures of this world, in our closets, our pantries, our garages and even in our pet's food dish". If this is all you strive for, remember that it will end up being a lonely place of eternal exile and torment, walled off from the love of God.

Mid the gap, open the gate, Jesus says. But how can do it? We can't open the gates by ourselves. Can we? Because of our sinfulness we haven't paid attention to the gap in the first place. In fact we have created a bigger gap between ourselves and God. But it is only when the work of Christ done on the cross of Calvary does an effective work in us is that we will pay attention to that great chasm. In fact, it is Christ that has removed the great chasm between us and God, and in doing so removes the chasm between us and others too. The problem is that we at times don't allow the effectiveness of the work of Christ be in us. We resist it, we get content with what we have, and what we do, sort of traditional way of life, and yet Jesus challenges us here to pay more attention to the way of bridging that chasm as the Holy spirit convinces of our sins, and in repentance receive His forgiveness, and in His forgiveness, mind the gap between us and the others.

In His name, amen.