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Crossing the Chasm

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Texts: Amos 6:1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

(C - Pentecost 17)

Money. Wealth. Riches.

Exile. Torment.

Ruin. Destruction.

The Readings for today certainly don't pull any punches, do they? They seem to establish a clear connection between having wealth and ending up in dire straits. In the Book of Amos, the rich on their ivory couches are exiled; in First Timothy the rich are "pierced with many pains"; and in Luke, well, in Luke the rich end up in hell. Not the most comforting thing to hear, is it?

After all, we all have money, even if it comes in the form of a student loan. We have the money to eat three meals a day; we have the money to wear clean clothes every day. Relatively speaking, we're rich. And I'm not talking about the rich in the spirit stuff. Compared to most of the rest of the world we're doing very well, financially speaking. We have hot, running water in our house, fresh produce in our fridge; we own at least one car, or know somebody who does. We aren't living in the lap of luxury like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey, but we have to be honest: we belong in the class the rest of the world calls rich. So what is it that the texts are saying to us? Are we, too, destined to exile and torment?

Well, of course you and I know that when it comes to the connection between wealth and salvation, it isn't money that is the "root of all kinds of evil," but the *love* of money. The Bible makes a strong distinction between having money and being obsessed by it. In the Reading from Amos the rich people being condemned are the ones who are not grieved over the poor. Amos is coming down on those who sit around all day listening to music and ignoring the poverty around them. In First Timothy the writer is talking about those people who desire *more* than just food and clothing, who set their hopes and their faith on

the “uncertainty of riches” rather than on God.

And really, that’s the heart of the matter, isn’t it? Money, in and of itself, isn’t evil. It’s our relationship with money that gets us into trouble. Evil raises its ugly head when we are obsessed with money, when we depend on financial stability instead of on God. When we put our desire for wealth ahead of our fellow human beings and especially ahead of God.

Now, we all know what an obsession with wealth looks like. People with massive credit card debt, people who gamble, people who are always buying the latest fashion item or CD or car. Of course, *we* are not those people! But there are other ways of putting wealth ahead of people. What about those people who buy brand-name athletic gear made by sweatshop labor in foreign countries instead of by minimum wage workers at home? Or those people who bank in major financial institutions that use their money to buy stocks in international arms manufacturers, simply because the banks can offer a higher interest rate? Or those people who vote for governments which increase federal spending while decreasing foreign aid?

Because those people, you know, are us! We live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world; our country is involved in the so-called global economy; we live on a continent that consumes more goods than many Third World countries combined. We buy our children hundred dollar shoes to play in, while in other countries orphans are rounded up and shot because the government can’t afford to take care of them. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on brand-name bottled water while across the ocean people live in villages that don’t have even one well among them. The movie industry in the last two years pulled in over 10.7 billion dollars in box office revenues; there are 95 countries in the world that don’t even make that much as their gross domestic product. Who hasn’t been to a movie in the last two years?

Let’s just talk for a minute about singing idle songs and not being grieved over the ruin of Joseph. Because, you see, we are all in this together. We can’t point fingers here. There are no individuals when it comes to being responsible for the care of the world. God created us all to be in community with each other. God intended for us to look after each other and care for one another. To help each other out in times of need, and to share what has been given to us so that there *is* no time of need. Not to grab more of what we have, even though others have nothing. Not to profit and become wealthy at the expense of fellow

human beings. God created the world with very specific instructions on the best way to make it work. Stand together, love your brother and sister as yourself. Support global *community*, not global economy. Otherwise....

Well, otherwise.... We are only now seeing what happens otherwise, when we abdicate our responsibility for our sisters and brothers. We are now seeing the consequences of putting our comforts and wealth above others' needs. Global instability. "Global" economies that support First World countries while oppressing Third World countries. Markets that feed the West while starving the East. A world order that keeps us in North America happy, while causing other people around the world to starve, go homeless, get frustrated, get angry, attack us.

You know, I really tried, but there is no way I can avoid the implications of what these texts have to say about the attacks on the World Trade Center. We are implicated in that disaster. We North Americans have ignored the effects our consumption has had on the rest of the world. We have failed to consider the consequences of our "senseless and harmful desires." Now, keep in mind, I am talking about consequences, not punishment. Not for one second do I believe that the deaths of some 3,000 people were the result of God punishing us for not getting along. Nor do I believe that our sins justify such terrible violence. Nobody deserves to suffer such horrific pain. But I do believe that humanity exists in a web of interaction, that we were created to be together so that the actions of one group have serious ramifications for another. We are, as a group of people — maybe not as individuals, but as a group of people — guilty of lying on beds of ivory and not being grieved, *grieved*, over the ruin of Joseph. We are the first to "go into exile" and our revelry is passing away. We can't avoid that. We can't avoid the fact that, like the rich man in Luke, we have placed ourselves on the opposite side of the chasm from God, and, as Abraham said, no one can cross from one side to the other. No woman, no man, no child.

The finality of that statement is stunning. We look at it in disbelief, trying to escape from underneath it. Because this side of the chasm is horrific. On this side, 7,000 people die in just one morning, countries wage war, families suffer. On this side of the chasm we live in a place of torment. So we search the parable for some message of hope, some gospel. But in this parable we search in vain. In this parable there is no forgiveness.

But this parable is not the whole Bible; it's not even the whole

Gospel of Luke. You see, Jesus is not finished speaking. There is more. In chapter 18 Jesus encounters another rich man, and tells the crowd that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” And he is asked, “Then who can be saved?” Are we all doomed?

No. Because finally, *finally*, we hear the Gospel. We hear Jesus say, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” The destructive effects of our obsession with money can be overcome. The uncrossable chasm can be crossed by God. For, as Paul proclaims, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Neither money, nor luxury, nor our own participation in evil can keep us from crossing that chasm when Jesus has died to allow it. Because we *are* forgiven the horrific things we do to one another. As incredible and unbelievable as it so often sounds, especially after 11 September, *all* are forgiven. Jesus died on the cross, and was resurrected by God in order to make it so. Our wrongs and our injustices have been rectified, so that we may walk with God once more, and be a part of God’s people. What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.

So what does it look like when we are once more in God’s community? How do we behave on God’s side of the chasm? Well, we start with the obvious, sharing our wealth with others. Look at what we have, and, as the writer of First Timothy says, “be content with these.....Be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” And it goes further. Refuse to participate in the one-sided global economy. Buy hand-crafted goods rather than mass-produced clothing. Protest against government policies that boost our national economy at the expense of other countries around the world. Bank with co-ops.

Now these are all very practical things, and I hope that isn’t the end of the list. I do believe that as Christian leaders in this community we are called to deeper participation. Particularly, we are called to be like Amos, to be the prophets of this time. Like Amos, we are to point out the faults and injustices that our countries commit, and we are to warn our own people as strongly as we can of the consequences the world will have to endure when we continue to ignore God’s instructions to care for each other: broken countries, broken people. We are to cry “Alas!” to those who are at ease in Zion, to those who feel secure on

And we have another role as well — as prophets always do. We are called to cry to God on behalf of the same people we are condemning. To weep before God for the forgiveness of our people, and for the restoration of God's peace. To beg God, from the depths of our hearts, to free humanity from the temptations of money and to help us set our hopes not on the uncertainty of riches but on the certainty of God. And finally, on behalf of the whole world, to claim God's promise that we will one day be on the other side of the chasm. Because what is impossible for mortals *is* possible for God.