

**Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Sept. 26, 2004)**

Attitude Adjustment

A few years ago I read an article called “Attitude Adjustment.” The sub-title of this article was: “In which the affluent persuade themselves the poor are no longer with us.”

The gist of the article is something I think has always been true, but perhaps it is even more so in our time and in our country, along with the growing sense of individualism and greed that seems to pervade our culture. It is simply this: more and more people tend to ignore the problems of other people who are poorer than they are, who are weaker and in some way dependent on assistance from others. Indeed there are still people who resort to the old rationalization that if people are poor it is their own fault because there are plenty of jobs available. Well I’m not at all sure about the availability of jobs in today’s market, and personally I think it’s scandalous, and hardly Christian, to demonize the poor in this way.

The other almost incredible statement I’ve heard is that there really are no poor people. Someone who lives in affluent suburbia and who hardly ever comes into the city once said to me, “I’ve never seen any poor people. I don’t believe they exist.” It’s the contemporary equivalent of the statement attributed to Marie Antoinette, “If the people have no bread, why let them eat cake.”

Is it obvious why I am spending some time talking about this article today? What is really interesting about it is that the author, in spite of the fact that he never mentions God or church or Jesus Christ, has written a very religious essay, almost a homily without the trappings of religion.

Besides that, of course, it is simply a contemporary way of putting across at least some of the ideas we heard in today’s readings.

Now neither Amos nor Jesus condemns riches or wealthy people, but, like the author of “Attitude Adjustment” they warn us of the consequences of ignoring the poor. We do so, they tell us, at our own risk.

Just as we did last week, we hear Amos again fulminating against the wealthy who spend all their time luxuriating in the comforts that their

money buys them. His description of the way they live almost sounds like an episode of “Life styles of the rich and famous.” And he tells them that if they continue this way, disaster awaits them.

Jesus has a similar message. As usual he puts it across in an intriguing story.

A rich man feasts luxuriously every day. A hungry beggar, Lazarus, sits at his doorway and would be happy to get the crumbs that fall from the table. But does he? No. The rich man pays no attention to him. They both die. The rich man goes to hell. The poor man goes to heaven. He rests in the bosom of Abraham. The scholars tell us that resting in the bosom of Abraham is simply another way of saying he is enjoying the heavenly banquet. So the situations are now reversed. In life the rich man enjoyed himself and Lazarus suffered. Now it is Lazarus who enjoys himself and the rich man who suffers. And now, in his suffering, the rich man cries out for help. Now, perhaps for the first time, when he suffers, he sees Lazarus whom he ignored when Lazarus was suffering. And Father Abraham says Lazarus cannot come to help him because there is a divide, a chasm, a division which separates them and cannot be crossed, a division caused by the rich man’s sin. What was the rich man’s sin? Not that he was rich. Jesus never condemns rich people or riches as such. He does frequently, as in this parable, point out the danger of riches or anything else to which we may be inordinately attached, how they can seduce us and prevent us from doing the right thing, how they can come between us and God and cause this division that separates the rich man from Lazarus and Father Abraham.

What was the rich man’s sin? He ignored the person in need. He did not share his own wealth with someone who could not help himself. Now this idea is not new with Jesus. In telling this story he might well be thinking of the 58th chapter of the Prophet Isaiah where we read this: “Is this not the fast that pleases me . . . to share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor, to clothe the one you see to be naked and not turn your back on your own.”

Now this is a powerful story. And it’s a powerful statement of where Jesus’ values and priorities are and what he expects of those who follow him. If it seems to be asking a great deal of us, well it is. It is in Luke’s

Gospel the equivalent of the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel where we are told that we will be judged and our eternal life will depend on how we have dealt with the poor, the weaker members of our society.

These parables, dear friends, are not told to us in order to frighten us or to discourage us. Admittedly they present very high ideals, a very lofty sense of values. But that's what Christianity is all about. In one sense they are warnings, cautionary tales. In another they are powerful statements of what it is that the Lord requires.

In our Eucharistic celebrations we come together to hear this word of God and to find some meaning in it for ourselves today. Then we share the one bread and the one cup that make us the one Body of Christ. Our hope, our prayer, as we grow closer to God and to one another, is that we may also be more prompt and eager to answer the call of the Lord that is presented to us so powerfully in stories like the one we have just heard, the parable of the rich man and the beggar.