

Rev. Fr. Leonard R. Klein
Former Associate Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, 1972-76
Heritage Sunday, Immanuel 150th Anniversary / 29 September 2013
Amos 6:1a, 4-7, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

At a wedding a month ago the couple chose as the first reading a portion of Proverbs' description of a good wife with its emphasis on useful work and economic gain. I mentioned in the sermon that the values expressed there were surely old fashioned and that therefore we would probably be able to learn something from the reading – inasmuch as there seems to be little to learn from contemporary culture. The evidence continues to mount that our very real technological and medical advances have not been met with comparable advances in human character and that in spite of the information available, in so many places and so quickly, ignorance about fundamental things, like the roots of our civilization and our republic, is increasing. In one troubling instance a study of Ivy League college graduates a few years ago revealed that their knowledge of basic civics – that is, how the government is constituted and works – actually declined over their four years of college.

I do not plan to indulge in a full-bore bewailing of the times, but I begin this way because it is my task to call your attention to things that are very old – in the first instance the heritage of this congregation but, more fundamentally, the Scriptures we encounter this morning.

Immanuel is old, 150 years old. That's not ancient, but it does take us back to the era of the Civil War and to a material and cultural world vastly different from our own. Even the liturgy used this morning is an older format, having been assembled in the late thirties and early forties.

It was what I grew up with, it was the liturgy in use when I was first ordained, and it served a portion of American Lutheranism very well for a long time. In turn it owed a great deal to the liturgical research and renewal of the mid-nineteenth century.

Nobody lives 150 years, and so that past is available to us only through the records and observations and material record of those who preceded us. From them we learn about faith and courage, about the sacrifice that enabled building an edifice like this in a much less affluent era. Just by looking around you profit from what they did.

We are also reminded by history that we share a common humanity with our forbears. There were conflicts and divisions, misjudgments, struggle, failed efforts, false starts. There was sin and death, grace and renewal. One of the errors in imagining that we have transcended our ancestors is that we miss how very much like them we are.

It is that common humanity that enables us to understand and learn from the past. It is that common humanity that enables us to read the ancient

Scriptures the Church puts before us this morning and to profit from them. The past is not unattainable; it is very much with us. We are not that different from our ancestors. In the famous line of novelist William Faulkner: “The past is never dead; it is not even past.” And we are here to rejoice in that today, for our lives are deeply enriched by the history of this church – the past is right here. We are sitting in it! And here we open our minds and hearts to the deep truths we receive from what God has revealed in the more distant past.

In the eighth century before Christ, the prophet Amos opened fire on the luxury of Israel’s rich and their disregard for the needs of the poor. Today his prophecy is being read up and down the East Side of Manhattan of all places. This part of the world is the very symbol of style, wealth and luxury, a place where care for the poor is expressed often by authentic generosity and too often frankly by a political correctness that conveniently exonerates itself from the most fiery claims of the prophet. Hold the right opinions and cast the right ballot and you can always feel good about yourself. To be sure, it was not those who built Immanuel who gave the East Side its old nickname as the “silk-stocking district;” they were struggling German immigrants.

But when Amos is in town you don’t need to be rich to be uncomfortable. He is strident. And he makes us listen, laying claim upon our wealth – however great or small – our ease, our complacency. He reminds us that anniversaries are not about taking our ease and basking in what others left us. The anniversary of a church is about the renewal of faithfulness to the Gospel upon which it was founded. It is about not being at ease in Zion.

We gather today not to congratulate ourselves for what our forbears achieved. That would be just a little presumptuous. We gather to thank God for the faith we have received and for this congregation and for this building that so beautifully expresses the faith. And we gather to reaffirm and renew our faith. So a good swift kick from the prophet is good for us spiritually.

Amos points us in the right direction. And he lays the foundation upon which Christ builds in the Gospel – the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man is not condemned simply for being rich. There is no Marxism here, no class warfare. In a sermon preached in Yankee Stadium about thirty-five years ago, Pope John Paul II pointed out that both characters in the parable are human beings. The poor man is not worthless because he has nothing and can do nothing of any apparent usefulness. The rich man is not evil because he is rich; his sin is complacency and unawareness. It can be, you know, a great sin to fail to pay attention, or at least it can lead us to sin. Jesus and the prophets mean to jerk us to attention, so that we might look around, examine our own lives, and step forward in the worship of God and the service of others.

Of course, our Gospel is a parable not a novel. There is no back story. We don't know what happened to Lazarus to make him wretched. He is a type, a stereotype if you will. The actual Hebrew name would be Eliezer – “my God is my help.” He is a wretched soul thrown on the mercy of God. And we don't know how the rich man came by his wealth. That's not what Jesus is interested in. He just wants us to come to the assistance of those who rely on God. And they are not only the poor; wretchedness comes in all forms.

We need also to remember, if we are to respond appropriately to this parable, that if there were no prosperous people there would be no one to give to the poor. Nor would there be anyone to support and sustain the ministry of the Church. Nor would it be possible to build and create beautiful things like the splendid church building.

Christian piety sometimes goes too far in the critique of wealth. The truth is that work and the creation of wealth are a fruitful and necessary part of being human – at least where we are situated now, after the fall and before the resurrection. And Dr. Johnson was almost surely right when he said that “A man is seldom more innocently engaged than in the making of money.” There is certainly plenty of corruption, but most of us are more likely to get into difficulties in our leisure than in our efforts to earn a living.

And in the second reading Paul reminds the rich to be responsible and to be good stewards, but he does not unilaterally condemn them.

So we remember with gratitude today the hard work and generosity of those who have gone before us, who made it possible for there to be a church here at all. They made it possible for you to be here and as a community to have access to truths unveiled long ago. They make it possible for you to be here so that God might call you to alertness and to responsibility, to sacrifice, to praise and to generosity.

And there is one more thing that the beauty of this place makes possible. Physical beauty can help us to open our eyes to the Kingdom of God and to awaken our hope, as does the parable today. The parable points beyond the rich man's condemnation to the hope of the Church. ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’

Here of course Jesus points forward to his own resurrection, but he situates it within the faith of Israel. Moses and the prophets call for the same kind of righteousness that he does. Though he is utterly new, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, he does not come from Planet Krypton. He arises from the faith and hope of Israel. Jesus only makes sense as a Son of the Covenant. He only makes sense because he emerges from what God has revealed in the past, through Moses and the prophets including Amos.

He who is our future is also a gift of the past, of all that God had said and done in Israel. The whole broad sweep of Church history since the resurrection

reveals God's faithfulness, as often as not in spite of human sin and frailty. The brief past that is our personal history also reveals God's mercy over and over again.

The 18th century thinker, Gotthold Lessing, did not think that we could be enlightened by the events that classical Christianity believed to have revealed God. The past was too inaccessible; it could not bring us enlightenment. Between then and now he saw, "an ugly great ditch which I cannot cross, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make that leap." He envisioned a ditch between us and the past like the gulf that separated Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham from the rich man in hell.

But I see no ditch here. I see a beautiful achievement of human faith and devotion. I hear words from Amos and Jesus that are as true and bracing and real today as they were centuries ago. Lessing was part of that movement that flattered itself by calling itself The Enlightenment. Too often the thinkers of the Enlightenment cut themselves off from the treasures of the past in their imagining that they had emerged from darkness by a unique achievement of their time. And the modern West has been deluded by that flattery ever since.

But it's pretty clear now that Faulkner, speaking from the darkness and distortion of the Jim Crow South had a much deeper vision: "The past is never dead; it is not even past."

Thank God – and that's what we're here for. It's why we're here; the past lives in this wood and in these stones. The past lives in Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. It is worth celebrating, because in fact it is also our present. We're sitting in it!