

26th Sunday of the Year (C)

September 25, 2016

Conventual Mass

It was May 31, 1889. A wall of water about forty feet high and half a mile wide came rushing down the narrow Connemaugh Valley. It flattened the villages in its path, carrying with it trees, houses, barns, animals and people dead and alive. The South Fork dam had given way. It took almost an hour for the water to reach Johnstown fourteen miles below the dam.¹

Lake Connemaugh was the pleasure lake formed by the dam belonging to the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club, a prestigious club for the wealthy industrialists of Pittsburgh and their families. It served as an escape from the noise, dirt and smoke of Pittsburgh. Unfortunately, the dam was improperly maintained. Leaks were plugged with mud and straw, screens had been placed over the overflow so that the expensive stocked fish could not escape. This screening trapped the immense debris caused by the previous night's storm and made the overflow useless. The top of the dam had been dangerously lowered so that it could serve as a roadway for carriages. When the dam gave way, about twenty million tons of

water were unleashed into the valley below about the same amount that goes over Niagara Falls in about half an hour. The toll: over 2,000 killed, of which almost 800 were never identified, 1,600 homes destroyed, industries laid waste, and millions of dollars in property damage.ⁱⁱ

I am sure that the wealthy involved in the dam break at South Fork did not intend the death, destruction and impoverishment of the victims of the flood. Nevertheless, they were so engaged in their own pursuits that they did not “see” and recognize the needs of those outside of their circle. And so the dam was neglected.

In the same way the rich man in the gospel did not see the beggar lying at his doorstep. Beggars were so common that they became invisible. How can you respond to someone who doesn’t exist for you? The rich man’s sin was not that he was wealthy, but that he used his wealth selfishly which made him blind to the needs of others.

The readings from last week and this week treat of the difficult issue of money and how we hold it in stewardship before God and neighbor.ⁱⁱⁱ It brings us to full circle again to the Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk6:10).

The prophet Amos' invective in our first reading is aimed against the wealthy of his country who had made their fortunes by robbing the weak and through unscrupulous dealings. Amos considers their lifestyle and banquets as sacrilegious parodies of the temple worship: "They eat lambs taken from the flock, improvising music ...like David and anoint themselves with the best of oils." These are cultic references to the blasphemy of their lives, offering holocausts and libations to themselves while pretending to worship at the altar of the God of the Covenant, the God who demands justice, righteousness and protection of the poor.^{iv}

Amos does not consider wealth itself evil, but what he condemns is the way it was obtained and the misuse of a resource that is only entrusted to us. The fundamental sin of these people is that they place their security in themselves and their riches with a total unconcern for others, especially the poor, the needy. Their way of life is a total disregard of God's covenant. A distinctive note of the covenant made on Mt. Sinai was the quality of not only one's relationship with God but also how one related to fellow members of the covenant community.^v This was not only underscored by the

covenant made by Jesus, but broadened by him to include those outside of the covenant community and even one's enemy.

Jesus does not condemn wealth per se in his parable but the thoughtlessness and self-centeredness that easily absorb us in our quest for money and material goods. In other passages Jesus warns about the danger of riches: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:24). Because wealth brings with it the danger of apparent self-sufficiency and the danger of isolating oneself from the poor and needy, Jesus warns against the dangers of riches.

Money, fine clothes, beautiful homes, our own bodies will one day be left behind and we will have to give an account of our stewardship to the Lord. Then the great reversal will begin: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life" (Jhn12:25). What we have given away is the only thing that we can take with us. None of us here are wealthy in the sense of those Amos addresses, but all of us are rich in talents and virtues that are given to us to serve others. St. Teresa of Calcutta noted that although there is extreme material poverty in the east, there is a poverty of love in the west. We are called to love and

serve even as Christ loves. This is not easy but if we want to call ourselves followers of Christ we have no choice. We are called to love not only those who seem to be lovable to us, but also those who seem unlovable, whether because of weaknesses of body or behavior, as St, Benedict reminds us.

There are many people today who give generously of their time to serve the poor. We need people who give direct assistance to the poor but we also need those who track voting records in Congress, raise questions at stockholders' meetings who fight for the environment and the like. And today in our global community the whole question of migrants and persecuted minorities has come to the fore.

I was struck recently by an article which appeared in the Catholic News Agency on line. Nadia Murad, a young Yazdi woman who escaped ISIS captivity, was named a UN Goodwill Ambassador after she briefed that body on the atrocities the captives, especially the women, experienced at the hand of their captors. At the UN ceremony, her lawyer, Amal Clooney, renowned Lebanese-British human rights advocate, activist and author noted that it was her first time speaking in the chamber of the UN headquarters and stressed

that “I wish I could say I’m proud to be here but I am not. I am ashamed as a supporter of the United Nations that states are failing to prevent or even punish genocide because they find that their own interests get in the way. I am ashamed as a lawyer that there is no justice being done and barely a complaint being made about it.”^{vi}

Clearly much needs to be done on many levels: the personal, the community and the global. The poor come in many guises: the materially poor, those on the margin, the persecuted, those oppressed in any way, the different. We cannot help them all, but we begin by serving the one God places immediately in front of us.

ⁱ [http://www.jaha.org/Flood Museum/history.html](http://www.jaha.org/Flood%20Museum/history.html)

ⁱⁱ [http://www.jaha.org/Flood Museum/history.html](http://www.jaha.org/Flood%20Museum/history.html) Facts About the Johnstown Flood

ⁱⁱⁱ Days of the Lord, The Liturgical Year, v.6 (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1991) 229

^{iv} Days of the Lord, The Liturgical Year, v.6 (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1991) 210

^v The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1990) 210

^{vi} <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/in-grilling-un-speech-amal...>