

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 25, 2022

Reflection by Sister Virginia Jung, OSB

Amos 6: 1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6: 11-16; Luke 16: 19-31

As Benedictines, hear Scripture read to us during the Liturgy of the Hours and at mass. We pray it daily in the psalms and other parts of the prayers. You probably also do *lectio divina* or other study of sacred texts at different points during the week. We think it's important and we think that God has something to say to us in these words, in the exhortations of the prophet Amos, the letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, the gospel as recorded by Luke. The editors of my Bible refer to this section of the Book of Amos as the 3 Woes, three warnings to the people of what will happen if they do not change a particular bad behavior. Our 7th grade math teacher liked to do that too, She was fond of the expression *Woe betide ye...*(insert the naughty student's name), *you'll be pushing a broom someday* (or whatever dire consequence might result from not learning math). Jesus, himself, used this method sometimes. In the gospel, he does it in the form of a parable, he also used the expression speaking directly to people as he went about teaching. In the 1st reading, we hear Amos' 3rd of 3 *Woe betide ye....* and the dire consequences of the bad behavior of complacency. This upset his audience so much that eventually they drove him out of town. And we get that. No one likes to be nudged or pushed out of their comfort zone. But that is what our God asks of us, to notice suffering, to notice injustice, whether it is personal, corporate, or systemic, and to be uncomfortable enough about it to develop healthier and holier approaches to life.

So, in counseling, we sometimes talk about the lifespan. We are each at a point along the arc of our individual lives and our lives as Benedictine Sisters or Oblates. We are part of a monastery that is at a point along the arc of its lifespan, as is the Church in the United States, as is the Church in the World, etc. And since Christianity is well advanced, in many ways, the complacency Amos rails against is a very real pitfall. Paul's letter to the young disciple Timothy, is all about the young Christian community, how to build it up, how to respond to the social aspect of following Christ. As older Christians, in an older Church, how do we listen for the truth of Christ, how do we steward that truth, how do we bear witness to it? In this reading, I noticed for the very first time, the expression noble confession which appears two times in this fragment of the letter. Of course, I have probably heard or read it thousands of times, but it felt new to me this week. Paul says that Timothy has made this noble confession and that Jesus did as well. I think it means accepting Baptism, of publicly professing belief in God, that all power comes from God, and that accepting that you are powerless. Out of that powerlessness, we need to open ourselves to God's teaching and to receiving the gifts, the graces, that come from God, gifts like righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness, to name a few. Those are attitudes and qualities we can use to respond to the presence of God and the needs of the various communities and systems we belong to today.

When we hear the teachings of Jesus Christ, as we do in today's parable, it is important not to take them for granted, to assume we know what it means, to barely listen. Especially because by almost all measures, global and local, we are privileged people. We stand much closer on the spectrum to Dives, the rich man, than we do to Lazarus. There are actually a lot of characters in this parable, Dives, Lazarus, Abraham, the five brothers of Dives, Moses, all of the prophets, and some street dogs. It's packed. Only 2, though, speak aloud in dialog – Abraham and Dives. Lazarus speaks by his suffering presence, the dogs in their silent, compassionate response, Moses and the prophets speak to us through our memory of the tradition, and the brothers...? Maybe the five brothers are the most like us, watching and listening, remembering, choosing. We have even more witnesses testifying and teaching us – Jesus Christ, the saints, our grandparents and parents, our Sisters who came before us. Each of us here might have a different response to the images evoked by this parable. One of them might be – what can I do about so much trouble, so much suffering in the world, in my city, in my family, in my monastery, at my work, wherever...? In that vein, I want to share something we recently watched and heard in my digital libraries class, that I think circles back to that sin of complacency mentioned by Amos.

In my Digital Libraries class, we just watched a webinar on Youtube– it was a panel of 3 museum curators and their moderator; they were all from Harvard University. They were speaking at an event sponsored by Harvard Art Museums and their topic was *Troubling Images: Curating Collections of Historical Photographs*. So of course, Harvard University has its own archives, but these people work in the special collections, in campus museums where the university has acquired all sorts of cultural material to preserve, describe, and make available to various publics. Here they are talking about the challenges of exhibiting photographs of violence and exploitation and why it is necessary to do that sometimes. They address many facets of that very well, of course – they are from Harvard - but I want to share something that happened between them in the panel, that wasn't part of the prepared content. One of the curators said that she notices that as she presents her exhibit to different groups, that her affect has flattened, that she has become kind of numb and wondered if that was a way of coping. At the time, I thought – sent her a mental message - Oh, you should attend more to what is happening there; that's a problem. Anyway, they all responded to her and also shared a bit of their own emotional experience. I can say, too, that working with even non-violent archival material can bring on a lot of emotions. At the end, in the Q &A, the moderator asked them to talk more about how they respond emotionally to this work and how they deal with their own feelings as they do this work. A second woman on the panel spoke of how, as a member of a community that has been exploited and violently treated, she cannot let herself look away from these types of photographs. She said “Numbness is a privilege” This really struck me. I will say that numbness sometimes is a trauma response but that it also can morph into a response of privilege. The woman who had originally spoken of numbing said that she appreciated that comment, that it gave her something to think about. I would say it offered her a lifeline in her own professional situation.

For us, we can consider how complacency might seem comfortable, but really it is numbing, it is killing off the compassion that is a birthright of our humanity. The grace that we received from God at baptism and throughout our lives urges us and gives us whatever we need to not look away from suffering, to engage with the suffering and accept the challenges to respond in healing, life giving ways. The words of Scripture in our prayer and study are a lifeline that God throws us every day.