

Whose Onion?

Homily for September 25th 2022

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Once upon a time there was a woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So, her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; “She once pulled up an onion in her garden,” said he, “and gave it to a beggar woman.” And God answered: “You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion brakes, then the woman must stay where she is.”

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. “Come,” said he, “catch hold and I’ll pull you out.” He began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. “I’m to be pulled out, not you. It’s my onion, not yours.” As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So, the angel wept and went away.¹

This is a very hard story to hear because I think there is something in it that challenges all of us. How easy it can be for us to live our lives with the kind of attitude that when asked the question: “Whose onion”? we respond with “it’s my onion”.

This story comes from the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky who would have been formed by readings, like the ones we heard today from Amos and Luke. Like the story of the woman in the lake of fire the words of Amos and Jesus challenge us. How easy it can be for us to be indifferent to the circumstances of others who are suffering. This might be due in part to our belief that I cannot do anything to help. It can also be due to our sense that it is none of my business.

I was talking with a woman this past week who at one time was teaching at St Francis High School. One student in her class came from a family of means, drove a fancy car and wore expensive clothes. Although this woman’s primary subject was math she was also leading the school’s programme called “Catholic Community of Caring” where they were discussing tangible ways to help the poor. This wealthy teenager was dismissive of what was being presented, and derisively stated the topic as none of his business and no concern of his. Bless the teacher who used this as an opportunity to speak with the voice of today’s readings. Although the young man was not won over, she said there were others in the class who realized that the onion is not just for me but is to be shared.

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

In Amos, written 700 years before Jesus we have people who like so many of us sinners are self-preoccupied. When we hear these words they should bug us.

**Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the midst of the stall; ²
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David invent for themselves instruments of music;
⁶ who drink wine in bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils, ³**

What is the issue here? The people are preoccupied with self-indulgence. Lives of luxury, drinking wine from bowls, using the finest oils and perfumes to pamper and feed themselves. Entertaining themselves with the newest songs, and satisfying their appetite with the finest foods.

Does this sound familiar? It should. I find this language really challenging because how easy it can be for me to live this way making me complacent and uncaring. This is highlighted by what is said at the beginning of the passage

*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,
and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph⁴*

Samaria was the capital of the northern country of Israel, and Zion, also known as Jerusalem was the capital of the southern country of Judah. Israel was also called Joseph at times. I know it's kind of confusing but take my word for it. While Joseph was being attacked and ruined by a foreign country called the Assyrians, the people in Samaria and Jerusalem were indifferent to the suffering of the people even though they were their own people. So says Amos, your indifference will come back to haunt you for your life of luxury will not last, but you too will be taken into exile and suffer judgment,

Now with this in mind turn with me to the Gospel and let me highlight a couple of parallels. Like the people critiqued by Amos the rich man in Jesus parable feasted sumptuously every day but was indifferent to the plight of Lazarus.

You will have heard me say before - the parables of Jesus have a twist. This parable has two of them. The first is that the person who is anonymous is the rich man, and it is Lazarus the poor man who is named. How different this would have been from that society and ours. Whose names are usually highlighted and admired, the rich and famous. But not for Jesus. It is this

² [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Am 6:4). (2006). Ignatius Press.

³ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Am 6:5–6). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Am 6:6). (2006). Ignatius Press.

nobody “full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table”. Lazarus is the “somebody” in the eyes of Jesus.

That is the first twist. The second has to do with their deaths. In the world of Jesus’ time, as is true today, it was believed that material wealth is a sign of blessing and reward and poverty and sign of judgment and cursing. Jesus turns this on its head, for we are told that in the world to come it is the poor man who is taken to the bosom of Abraham, representative of paradise and the anonymous rich man who is consigned to the netherworld.

Why is this? Well because the rich man had lived the whole of his life with the attitude that it is my onion; whereas Lazarus was to be an invitation for the rich man to enter heaven while on earth by noticing Lazarus and lifting him up. That is by sharing the onion.

The story is told of Cardinal Francis George of Chicago who was at a gathering of wealthy Chicagoans who were contributing large sums to the social ministries of the Church. In thanking them he stated:

The poor need you to stay out of poverty, but you need to poor to stay out of hell.

Now here is the point everybody. The whole of the biblical tradition and most especially Jesus when asked the question, whose onion - answers it is our onion. It is to be shared. The one who did rise from the dead spoke with great clarity about the way we are care for others, we are not to be indifferent.

This is why in the Church guided by the Holy Spirit teaches that we can be stirred from indifference by practicing the Corporal and Spiritual Acts of Mercy. Listen to what the catechism has to say about these:

The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.⁵

At St. Peter’s we are gifted to be able to offer these corporal and spiritual acts of mercy in very tangible ways. Our St Vincent de Paul Society delivers 70 Hampers a month to needy families, our CWL provide wonderful funeral lunches for grieving families and friends. Our Knight of Columbus had the Men’s Knight Out on Friday evening. The profits from this event are to support corporal acts of mercy – like Elizabeth House- where young moms can make the life giving choice to have their baby rather than abort the child. Our Pastoral Care Team are actively engaged in visiting the sick and our boots and coats for kids ensure children have warm outwear for the winter ahead. As well the contribution we make to “Together in Action”, the Bishop’s Annual Appeal supports the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy beyond the parish level.

⁵ e Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2447

May we be inspired by today's texts to realize that it is not my onion, or your onion, but our onion. We are to help one another to experience something of heaven on earth by our generosity and care.