

Amos 6: 1-7
I Timothy 6: 6-19
Luke 16: 19-31

The Life that Really is Life
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Contentment. Happiness. Well-being. The Life that really is Life. The letter to Timothy seems to have our best interests at heart, doesn't it? But how do we possibly measure such things as abundance and happiness? It's so subjective, and seems to depend so much on your lens, or your vantage point.

Here's one way to measure well-being: the GNP, the Gross National Product. It measures the well-being of the corporate sector. An all-important measure of current economic fitness, which, by the way, did not exist prior to the Great Depression. It's just numbers, but it can tell us something. The GDP goes up: every time a forest falls, with every oil spill, every time a new cancer is diagnosed. In a book called Affluenza, we read a great example of this crazy paradox: "Imagine receiving an annual holiday letter from distant friends, reporting their best year, because more money was spent than ever before. It began during the rainy season when the roof sprang leaks and their yard in the East Bay Hills started to slide. The many layers of roofing had to be stripped to the rafters before the roof could be reconstructed, and engineers were hired to keep the yard from eroding away. Shortly after, Jane broke her leg in a car accident. A hospital stay, surgery, physical therapy, replacing the car, and hiring help at home depleted their savings. Then they were robbed and replaced a computer, 2 TVs, a DVD player, and a digital video camera. They also bought a new home security system, to keep these new purchases safe." What a great year for the GPD! Merry Christmas!

The same book, Affluenza (which was made into a documentary), describes another measurement tool, the GPI: Genuine Progress Indicator. This works a bit differently, and includes 24 aspects of our economic lives that GNP ignores: nature, sustainability, exercise, social connection, volunteering, housework, and quality are added as valuable; cost of accidents, crimes, family breakdowns are subtracted. Maybe that comes a bit closer to giving us a sense of happiness or contentment or a good life.

Another measure: the mountain kingdom of Bhutan got a lot of mileage out of its practice, first adopted by their Dragon King in 1972, of using a broad "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) measure of its people's welfare rather than a narrow measure like income. Their surveys measured Psychological wellbeing, Health, Time use, Education, Cultural diversity and resilience, Good Governance, Community vitality, Ecological diversity and resilience, Living standards. By the government's measure, their populace was extremely happy, the happiest people in the world, they say. They also introduced the concept of "not-yet-happy people." All one hyphenated word: notyethappy. And they reported, "The people who are not-yet-happy are an important policy priority." I love that.

It may not come as a surprise that the GNH in Bhutan has not guaranteed individual human rights. Taking it at face value, you would never know that Bhutan has for decades been carrying out an ethnic cleansing of the country's Nepali-speaking minority. Starting in the 1980's, one-sixth of

the population, tens of thousands of Nepalis have been expelled from the country. Their houses were seized or burned down and people deported for speaking Nepali, refusing to eat beef (Nepalis are generally Hindu while ethnic Bhutanese are Buddhist) or declining to wear traditional dress. The displaced are still living in refugee camps in Nepal; none has been allowed to return. Two of them have settled in Vermont with their families, and we hosted them here last January in a program on refugee resettlement. Forgive me if I am a bit skeptical of national happiness – or personal happiness, for that matter – that depends upon oppression and intolerance for maintenance. But, as I said, it's subjective, and seems to depend so much on your lens, or your vantage point.

Our scriptures remind us to look around, near and far, up and down, to see what is really going on, and to know what is fair and what is compassionate. Eight centuries before the life of Christ, Amos addressed those who lived on the heights – “those at ease in Mount Zion...those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.” Alas, he says, for you who lie on beds of ivory, who eat plenty, who sing, who drink wine from enormous bowls, who anoint themselves. Why alas? This sounds like success. Alas, because they have not noticed the poor, on the other side of the city wall. There was a growing gap between rich and poor, and the whole system was about to crumble.

Eight hundred years later, Jesus told a parable that could have been set in Amos' time. Through all the ups and downs of history, people had not changed much. A rich man wore beautiful clothes and feasted every day. Outside his gate was a poor man, Lazarus, who was hungry and covered with sores. This parable was not Jesus' creation. It was a kind of folktale: there were 7 different versions of it in Jewish rabbinic literature. Some people think it came from an Egyptian source about reversals after death. It is unusual because it gives us a name – Lazarus – for one of the characters, the only person named in any parable. And it is the poor man who gets the name! And his name means “the one God helps or cares for.” (By the way, we should not confuse this fictional Lazarus with the Lazarus found in the Gospel of John, Mary and Martha's brother). So we might get a hint ahead of time that this poor man, along with his name, gets the notice of heaven.

The parable set up contrasts, and shows up the gap between the lives of these two men. The rich man isn't just rich: he has royal purple clothing of the finest materials. He doesn't just have plenty of food: he feasts sumptuously every day. Lazarus is not just poor: he has been cast down-dumped - at the gateway of this rich house, implying that he cannot move on his own. He is not only covered with ulcers: dogs, unclean and despised, lick the sores. He is not just hungry: he is hoping for crumbs, and there is no indication he got any.

But these earthly contrasts just set the stage for the real drama of difference. At death, Lazarus is lifted up by angels to Abraham's side, where he at last is comforted. The rich man goes down, is entombed, and then tormented in Hades. Now he has to lift his eyes to see an even wider gap between him and Lazarus. He lifts his eyes, looks up and finally notices that beggar who lived at his gate.

It would be nice to think, that in the afterlife, all lessons would finally be learned. But you have to wonder about the rich man. He has been in the habit of ordering people around, and he can't seem to stop now. He tells father Abraham to send Lazarus, like a servant, to get him some water and actually touch his tongue. Apparently Lazarus is no longer a disgusting untouchable. When Abraham points out that this is impossible, because of the great chasm between them, he issues another order: “Well, then send Lazarus to my five brothers with a warning about all this.” Really? Really, rich man? Don't you get it that things have changed? You can't just give orders like this.

Abraham's response is that the living have all the information that they need, all the warnings, all the instruction from the law and the prophets. It's true, we have read Amos today, and the first century rich had those books of prophecy too. It's not rocket science: notice the poor, treat them fairly, have compassion. The miracle of someone returning from the dead with the same message will be no more effective. Know your tradition, and take it to heart.

This story was not told to give us exact descriptions of heaven and hell, in terms of temperature or comfort. It was told to describe the here and now, and our present opportunities. Back in the 16th century John Calvin wrote, "*The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul.*" I also don't think that it was a story that gives us an easy formula: the rich deserve to go to Hades and the poor deserve to go to Abraham. Then we could simply say that money is bad, in the long run, and poverty is good. And all go home. But there is a deeper problem, a deeper divide here.

This parable links our wellbeing and that of others. If we cannot see up and down and all around, and in so doing, find compassion for others, we have lost something of our humanity. Wealth can blind us and numb us to the need of our neighbor. Wealth can delude us into imagining that we ourselves are not needy, that our narrow circle is sufficient for a full life. The rich man didn't intentionally hurt Lazarus. He didn't seem to notice him at all. Throughout the Bible, the danger of great wealth is the way it so takes over people's lives that it makes them deaf to the teaching of the prophets and blind to the sufferings of neighbors. The truth of this parable is that the rich man needs Lazarus as much as Lazarus needs the rich man. The independence that riches seem to bring is only an illusion. The rich man thinks he can afford not to see Lazarus lying outside his gate. The rich man lives under the illusion that his gate is a defensive shield, not an open possibility. The rich man lives with the illusion that we are intrinsically separate beings, that each belongs to him or herself, and that to be responsible only for ourselves is enough.

Jesus' parable points to something better for us, something better and more real – the reality that we were created not to be alone, but to be loved; not to be users of one another, but to be partners in the world. We were created not to dig chasms and let gulfs separate us, but to build bridges.

Do you ever see Lazarus at the gate? Our church is a kind of gateway too. Every week, people call or come by my office because they have heard that they can get help here: vouchers for food or gas, help with rent or and electric bill. And we have a pastor's discretionary account, well funded by our Christmas Eve offering. So I can offer some help. But this is a struggle too. When someone is obviously under the influence of something, when someone is reeking of cigarettes (and I wonder whether the help I give is just supporting tobacco companies indirectly), when a group of friends comes in one car, then come up the stairs one by one as though they were unconnected, when I have been warned by a social service agency that our help may not be helpful, in the long run – it is hard to be on the rich man's side of the gate. These are bigger problems than I can solve. I share this with you because I know that the teachings of the Bible might sound simple, but they are not. Our web of connection with the poor of the world is not all about feeling good. In search of the life that really is life we stumble around sometimes. In opening the gate and crossing the gap, I am made more aware of my dependence on a community of faith to keep doing the work.

Every year when we hold our annual giving campaign, I am very aware of an ambivalence about money and the church. There is a danger in preaching on scripture passages like those read today and saying "Accumulating wealth is bad, so give us yours." How is that OK? No, this is about being part of a community that reminds us of our place in God's good world, in God's economy of grace.

This Bible and this church are aids to my eyesight. They help me with the blinders that narrow my vision. They have helped my children when they see others through the lens of justice and caring. The Bible and this community have given me strength to cross boundaries and walk through, pausing long enough to see who is there. The Bible and this church challenge me every day to narrow the gaps between us and share the blessings of a God who loves us all.

Then I begin to experience the life that really is life.