



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 28, 2025
AMOS 6:1a, 4-7; PSALM 146; 1 TIMOTHY 6:6-19; LUKE 16:19-31

WE DO WHAT WE WANT TO DO



My daughters are now in their 30s, but I can still remember when they were teenagers navigating with them as they learned to drive.

Besides a few gray hairs which have mostly fallen out since, I have vivid memories of them pointing out my bad driving habits after

they'd gone through Driver's Education and gotten some driving miles under their belts.

When the family was all in the car together, parents in front, kids in back, they could still see the speedometer. It was like they had come upon a newfound piece of reality—that their dad did not always do the right thing. “Speed limit’s 30, Dad,” as I was going 42 or something. My apparent reckless disregard of the law, however slight it seemed to me, was for them a real crisis, or at least a matter of moral justice.

I have three demerits in 44 years of driving, two incidentally acquired years ago on my way to the hospital as a physician, and one showing a visiting priest around Seattle a few years back. The cops had no leniency for the doctor; I got off with a warning for the last one. I did tell him I was a church pastor showing another pastor around town, so, you know, there’s that.

I share this story, however light it may be, and Lord knows we need some levity these days, right?! I share this story to setup this question: Why do we do what we do? Why do I speed instead of following the law? At some level, I choose to break the law because I want to do that more than I want to avoid getting a speeding ticket or taking longer to get to my destination. I do what I want to do.

Ethicists include this line of thought in the field they call casuistry—the general moral theory that can be applied to specific circumstances and conclude either the right way to proceed, or to provide a reasonable explanation for why a different path is taken. The work of moral casuistry is to become more aware of the decisions we make and why.

Another simple illustration: If a person decides to skip church some Sunday morning so that he can sleep in, or read the paper, or play golf, or whatever else, the truth is he wants to do the other activity more than he wants to come to church.

Do I believe that going to church has merit? Well, yeah! But I have little interest in manipulating or browbeating people to get them in the church. I think the Church would do well to banish words like “should” or “ought.” If you want to go to church, go to church; if you don’t want to, then don’t. But know why you do what you do. We are all going to do what we want to do, and as far as I know Jesus never knocked people over the head or shamed them into following him.

This line of thought—moral casuistry—is at the heart of our scriptures this morning. Amos’ admonition is presented to rich folks whose slovenly lifestyles are impeding their

orientation to gratitude for God's blessings; Paul's exhortation to Timothy and the early church community is to do good—not because they should or ought to, but because orienting to God is simply more lifegiving than orienting to the lesser things.

And then the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus. Remember, parables are not to be taken literally; their deeper meaning always lies in a realm of interpreted truth.

So Lazarus lies outside the rich man's gate (gates in Luke's gospel are symbols of injustice)—hungry, disease-ridden, suffering. Even the dogs lick his oozing sores. It's a terrible scene. Who could miss such suffering right before their eyes as they passed through the gate? Hmmm.

And yet, the rich man literally has to step over Lazarus each morning as he crosses the threshold. He wants to ignore the poor man on his doorstep more than he wants to deal with him. Casuistry.

But then, something remarkable happens—in the hellish existence that came when he could only think of himself, the rich man considers the plight of others and says go tell them—my brothers—who are still living and beg them to do things differently than I have. You and I are the brothers, you see—the ones

still alive—ones who are able to choose what we want to do.

Jesus says that sending someone from the dead to strike fear in our hearts is not the way to turn our hearts to care for one like Lazarus. The threat of hell is not the way to salvation.

If that were the ethical guide motivating one's action, then wanting to avoid hell would be the prompt for caring for Lazarus—hardly a compassionate or dignifying reason for caring for him. If that is the motive, then we are back to *shoulds* and *oughts*—I should care for him so that I don't get punished...

Instead, Jesus says listen to God's story and be part of it. It is a story of steadfast love and compassion and invitation to a shared abundance of life.

My friends, in recent days we've seen the contrasting stories playing out in the news. Rich and poor, condescending hate and merciless suffering, arrogant disregard and obsequious line-toeing to authority. We do what we want to do.

We who gather in this place week by week orient to a radically different story that invites us to practice mercy and forgiveness, compassion and dignifying love of the other, even when we don't want to see them or deal with them... especially when we don't want

to see them or deal with them. Not because we should, but because we want to.

And let's be clear: in our story, "them" means everyone, even those we don't like... or can't stand.

It is a story scripted by a merciful God who refuses to let Hell have the final word. From the earliest days of Christianity, our story declares that there has been a harrowing of hell by Christ who bridged that chasm once and for all—extending the invitation to the whole of humanity, past, present and future:

Our creeds say it clearly—*Christ descended to the dead, and we believe in the resurrection of the dead.*

It's a story that invites us to redirect our lives toward that good news. Is that what we want to do?—because if it is, if we really want to orient our lives to that good news, then everything else in our lives will change. Not because it should, but because we will want it to.

May it be so.

Luke 16:19-31 [Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"]

ⁱ <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/new-york-beggar>, accessed 9/25/2025