

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: September 22, 2019

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Amos 8: 4-7

1 Timothy 2: 1-8

Luke 16: 1-13



“Eternal Riches”

Introduction

Once again this Sunday our first reading from the Old Testament sets the theme for our Scripture reflection. In this reading from the Book of the Prophet Amos, we hear of Amos, a shepherd and trimmer of trees, who lives in the south. Amos hears the voice of God to go north and challenge the lavish life-style of the leaders of the people there. He hears God inspiring him to go and call these leaders and the rich families there to come to their senses. They need to become mindful of the people of the land, especially the ordinary families and those in poverty.

Amos is challenging the leaders there to go beyond their concern for power, prestige, and luxury, and to see others around them in their real circumstances. The prophet is pointing out that God wants a different kind of world, a world of mutual care and interdependence. God hopes for people to share the abundance of the land and animals so all can thrive and achieve their full personhoods.

Parable in Luke's Gospel

Amos' words lead us into the Gospel passage we heard this morning. Luke is beginning a new chapter and a new theme about money and riches, and we will hear about this theme this week and next week in our Sunday liturgies.

Luke often begins a new theme with a parable or several parables around his theme. So today we hear the parable of the “crafty steward.” For a number of reasons it is a little difficult to follow this parable, but it is well worth our reflection.

There is some Middle Eastern humor at play in this parable, and it is sometimes difficult to translate humor from one culture to another. So I think it might help set up our understanding of this parable by thinking about this crafty steward as the actor, Joe Pesci. Do you know this actor?

Joe Pesci is a lovable, shorter actor who often plays a “side-kick” to other lead actors. He often is making deals and wants to play the odds of accomplishing his goals, even sometimes on the edge of legality. I would also suggest thinking of the owner in the parable as similar to President Trump from his “Apprentice” days where he loved to fire people. So with this picture in our mind, let’s see what the parable holds for us.

Job Description for Stewards

Stewards were in charge of the property of their masters. They could distribute cash loans, the lending of tools, the managing of property, or the lending of seed for planting. All of this was done to make profits for the master and for themselves as stewards. The stewards collected the rents and the debts, and they often charged interest with much of this going into their own pockets.

So we see this crafty steward making many deals and spreading his master’s property around liberally ... all to make money for his master and himself. In the parable the master realizes that he does not have any “liquidity,” or cash on hand, to support the lifestyle he has become accustomed to; and he calls his steward in for an accounting. As the master realizes that the steward has overdone these deals on his property and that he is bound by all of these agreements, he fires the steward.

So the crafty steward who is “a scoundrel but no fool” as one scholar says, starts to improvise. Without telling others that he is fired, he becomes generous and forgiving of the debts of those who owe his master. He knocks off some of his profits possibly or the profits of his master ... we are not completely sure. But overall the steward acts in a more understanding and generous way with others hoping that they will be gracious to him in the future. In a humorous way, Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees and religious leaders around him that if this crafty steward who is trying to save his skin can “get religion” and see the value of becoming kind and generous ... shouldn’t they who are religious leaders be even more generous and forgiving as “children of light.”

We know Jesus is speaking here especially to the Pharisees because in the next line in Luke’s gospel we hear that the ‘Pharisees who heard Jesus’ words scoffed at him because they loved money.’

Deceptive Wealth

One thing I have learned in reading and listening to the Scriptures is to pay attention and keep reflecting on the words or passages that “comfort” us or “disturb” us. This is often the way God wants to speak to us more deeply through the Scriptures.

The words “dishonest wealth” kept working on me this week. I didn’t understand its meaning, and in truth I couldn’t see the “dishonest” part of the situation. As I worked with this Gospel passage, what I saw was that the English word “dishonest” is not as helpful to us to understand more fully the message of Jesus. A better translation might be “deceptive” wealth or “alluring” wealth. What Jesus is pointing to is that “mammon” is anything that the world offers us that can draw us away from God. This might be titles, degrees, positions, privileges, honors, material security, or material goods. These can be “deceptive riches” that allure us away from the “eternal riches” that God is constantly giving us and wants us to know and possess.

What are these “eternal riches” that God is offering us? I would offer that they are the love of God and the love of one another. So Jesus is encouraging us to be wise with the world’s allurements so we can experience and “know” the eternal riches of love, presence, and communion with God and one another.

A Tip from St. Francis

St. Francis offered us in the Franciscan family his “tips for the road” as we try to live our spiritual lives. They are called his “admonitions,” but really they are his tips for living a healthy and holy life.

My favorite goes like this: “We are who we are before God, nothing more, and nothing less.” I see in this “tip” that St. Francis is encouraging us to see the treasure we have in being sons and daughters of our Good God. This is who we are in our depths. We have this dignity as a gift from God. But the other part of his saying is that we are not God. We are creatures. When we put these two parts together, we see our deepest dignity and our true humility. We have been gifted with divinity (divine sonship and daughterhood) as the human persons we are. To hold these truths together tells us who we truly are and how rich we are. We need not be deceived by the “alluring riches” of the world.

Conclusion

Jesus is once again encouraging us today to spend more time and energy on these “eternal truths” and to learn to be generous and forgiving with the world’s riches. We are invited to not withhold what we can give to others when we see their needs ... trusting in the abundant love of God to hold us and provide for us all.

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