

First Impressions 25th SUNDAY -C-
Amos 8: 4-7 Psalm 113 I Timothy 2: 1-8 Luke 16: 1-13
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

No parable is an easy read. Sometimes the stories seem simple enough, and then their meaning seeps out to us, and we realize, sometimes with a shock of awareness, that we have to reevaluate our lives. Today's parable has extra complications for the one who preaches and those who will hear it proclaimed this Sunday. The difficulties come forth quickly. What "squandering" of the master's property did the steward do? Why would the rich man praise his steward for what seems to be the steward's dishonest and self-serving actions? Is the parable really suggesting we emulate a conniving person who acts only to save his neck?

There are two segments in today's gospel: the parable (vv. 1-8a) and the subsequent verses (vv. 8b-13)---which are linked to the parable because of the money theme. To help focus and simplify the preaching, I would preach from just one of these sections, not both. Let one go till the next time the passage comes up.

The parable is the main feature, so let's focus on it. The steward has been caught. We aren't sure of his exact offense, but he has been reported for "squandering" the rich man's property. He is in trouble and needs to act quickly and decisively. And he does. He reduces the debts owed the master. Hasn't he acted dishonestly again? How can he be praised for that? This gospel passage has been a challenge to those who read and study the scriptures. It's possible the steward was charging extra interest from the debtors, hoping to make a profit for himself. If so, by his discounting the debts he was eliminating his own dishonest gains. Since usury was forbidden by Jewish law, the steward was doing what he should have been doing in the first place as an observant Jew. Or maybe the steward was eliminating the commission he would have rightfully received for himself. You can see why the sayings (8b-13) are placed after the parable. The first saying is certainly applicable, "the children of this world are more prudent with their own generation than are the children of the light." The steward acted shrewdly in a crisis situation and for that he deserves praise.

Jesus may be suggesting that his followers will face another kind of urgency in their own generation. If Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem and is punished and dies, what will his followers do in that crisis? Will they be "children of light" and have the wisdom to continue choosing Jesus and his ways in that and any other crisis they face? Or, will they be "children of the world" and go for the quick fix and the easy way out? What will we do when crisis occurs

in our lives? It has and it will again. We hope we will be the “prudent” stewards who take serious stock of the situation and once again turn towards the light. That is something to pray about at this Eucharist— a prayer of gratitude that we knew what to do when life got difficult and a prayer of hope that God will guide us the next time it does. “Help us to act prudently O God.”

The parable invites us to examine our use of material possessions. One of the central themes in Luke’s gospel is the suspicion Jesus conveys towards worldly wealth. Material things can trap us and divert our attention from what truly matters in life. Haven’t we seen families divided over possessions and inheritances; marriages ruined by a spouse preoccupied with business dealings; wars fought over land and resources; lives ruined for the sake of the “bottom line,” etc.

We can “make friends with dishonest wealth.” There are wealthy people in Luke’s gospel who seem to follow the thrust of the parable and make wise use of their time and their wealth. They use their possessions to serve Jesus as “children of light.” E.g. the woman who anointed Jesus with expensive ointment (7:36 ff) and Zaccheus, who gave half his possessions for the sake of the poor (19:18).

People in gospel times and now have figured out how to use their resources in God’s service. Stirred by teachings like today’s gospel, they have decided to act quickly and decisively when occasions arise. Not because they gave everything away, though some did, but because they never let “mammon” rule their lives or be the sole guide for their decisions. For example. Smart business people have financed and helped train the unemployed so that they could find work and support their families. Others have helped the elderly organize their finances so that they could pay for crucial medications and health care. Lawyers have argued cases for those who couldn’t afford to pay them. Teachers have donated after-school hours to kids who need a hand to catch up. We have many kinds of resources that can be used---guided by Jesus’ wisdom. The gospel gives us an example of someone who knew what he had to do in a crisis situation and Jesus directs us to act quickly and behave similarly--- but under the direction of “the light.”

As we examine the complexities of the parable, its subsequent sayings and its social and cultural aspects, we can get side tracked in studious details and miss the obvious impact of Jesus’ images and words. He is asking us about our fundamental choices and loyalties. He wants to know who or what comes first in our lives. If, after reflection, we discover that we have been acting more like “children of this world” and less like “children of the light,” then this parable can serve as an impetus to “set things right.” It also advises us to be quick about it!

To put it crassly, God's and only God's business should be first in our lives.

As we ponder the parable the prophet Amos reinforces its message. Amos criticizes those who make profits off the backs of the poor. As citizens of the first world, there are comforts and luxuries we enjoy at the expense of poor countries and low-wage employees—even slaves. For example, the clothes we wear are economical for us because they may be made in sweatshops abroad. Luke and Amos, like the other biblical writers, show God's preference for the poor. Jesus puts wealth under suspicion when he labels it, "dishonest wealth." He questions how we acquire it and at what cost to the poor.

We have goods that aren't so much ours by right, but instead, they have been entrusted to us. We have a responsibility to use the things of the earth, as well as things we have earned, in responsible ways because we belong to a community of human beings—in family, community, parish, nation and world. The parable should make us uneasy if most of our energy and time are focused on our material security and our future and less on what is valuable in God's eyes. What can we do to make our world a better place; how can we help the desperately poor; to whom must we show forgiveness and compassion; what must we do to deepen our personal relationships? What, in other words, must we do as children of light in a world that values people and nations based on their power, wealth and influence in the world?

QUOTABLE

Luke 16: 1-13

[Jesus] did not mean to say that we should act unfairly in view of the Kingdom. He asked us to act as quickly and as efficiently as that caretaker in the situations we meet.

He foresaw an obvious objection we might make in deciding not to act in the world. Isn't this world a place of darkness? Aren't all its structures corrupt? Isn't everything tainted with evil? Wouldn't it be better if we retired totally from public life—socially, politically, and economically? Shouldn't we keep ourselves pure and without stain?

His answer was: "No, you should not abstain. Use money, use all you have, tainted as it is, to win you friends, and thus make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you in the tents of eternity."

We cannot escape from the evil of this world. We cannot keep our hands clean, but we are not allowed to keep them in our pockets, either. We have to take the risks he took in order to change us all.

—Joseph G. Donders in, *PRAYING AND PREACHING THE SUNDAY GOSPEL*. New York: Orbis Books, ISBN 0-88344-615-4, page 217.

A GOOD SET OF CDs FOR THE PREACHER

GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS: ISLAM, John L. Esposito. Chantilly, Va. The Teaching Company, 2003. Six CDs, with a 73-page Course Guidebook).

Islam is the second largest and fastest growing religion in the world. Esposito is a professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. His specialty is Islam, and these lectures take us through Islam's origins, historical development and the issues and challenges Muslims face in the modern world. They also inform and challenge non-Muslims to learn about and come to a deeper appreciation for this faith and its billion believers in our world. (For a fuller review go to our webpage: preacherexchange.com and go to "Book Reviews.")

JUSTICE NOTES

"Beloved: First of all, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life. (1 Timothy 2:1)

"Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the kingdom revealed to "little children," to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the Beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history...*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2660)*

Praying for social justice is vital. It is a way to bring ourselves and all that we care about into the Heart of God. We invite you to cut out the following prayer and use it during the coming weeks to pray for our nation and our leaders as St. Paul recommends in his letter to Timothy in today's reading.

Lord God, you created all people in your image and likeness and call us to be one in the Body of Christ, your Son. We pray for the leaders of our nation and all world leaders that they may embrace your wisdom and justice and rule with benevolence and mercy. May we as a nation share the riches of our heritage and natural resources with peoples in need throughout the world and may we live in solidarity with all people as faithful citizens of our world. Bless and strengthen those who work to bring relief to the oppressed and hungry throughout the world.

We ask these prayers through your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

- For the Church, that we may be a witness to Christ's love by practicing charity and promoting justice and peace throughout the world, we pray to the Lord ..
- For all citizens of the United States, may our participation in the electoral process lead to a world of greater justice and peace, we pray to the Lord. .
- For those who serve in elected office, may they lead with courage and wisdom, reflecting the Church's teaching that the moral test of our society is how the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable are faring, we pray to the Lord . . .
- For the earth, that our nation's leaders will be inspired by God's Spirit to protect all of creation, we pray to the Lord
- For leaders around the world, may they find ways to bring an end to war and violence, and promote peace and development of all nations, we pray to the Lord
- For those who serve the poor and afflicted, may their work and service be a beacon of hope and a source of comfort to your people, we pray to the Lord."

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:.....

- Michael D. Holmes #0189289 (On death row since 9/8/00)
- Marcus Douglas #0217326 (11/9/00)
- Shan E. Carter #0486636 (3/19/01)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606