

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 25<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Amos 8: 4-7      Psalm 113      I Timothy 2: 1-8      Luke 16: 1-13

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

We expect these first readings, which are usually from the Hebrew text, to speak words of consolation to Israel, for she so often finds herself in dire straits. Her history seems to be filled with slavery, oppression and current or expected attacks from bigger and hostile neighbors. Israel needed to be reassured of God’s fidelity frequently. But today’s reading from Amos, written in the eight century before Christ, has a different cast about it. That’s because it was a time when Israel was doing quite well. The book of Amos is a brief prophetic work of only nine chapters, and its focus is a long condemnation of Israel’s treatment of the poor in her midst.

It’s hoped that we have by now, put aside older notions of a vengeful and fiery God— a God we held at a distance, for fear of getting too close and setting the divine into a temper tantrum. The God of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is a God of mercy and tender love who is ready to forgive our transgressions whenever we ask for forgiveness. This is the image of the God who shines through our scriptures and in the flesh of Jesus. All well and good. Nevertheless, there is one thing that stirs God to fury, and it is evident in the Amos reading — whenever the poor are oppressed. Then God turns on a white-hot anger and speaks in a very loud voice indeed. Such is God’s fury against Amos’ contented and wealthy contemporaries.

These verses are a judgment against those in Israel who oppress the poor and profane the name of God. And how do they do this? The prophet is quite clear. The business people, with whom the poor must negotiate, can’t wait till the religious feasts end so that then can return to their selling and lending. They plot and scheme to cheat the poor, they manipulate the currency and tamper with the scales. They “diminish the ephah, add to the shekel and fix the scales for cheating.” Imagine the hardships these unscrupulous inflicted upon the poor who had to buy wheat from them for their daily food. When the wheat ran out or the value of the money to buy it diminished, were the suffering poor tempted to think that God could no longer provide for them their daily bread? When in truth, it was the scheming of the moneyed merchants who had taken the bread from their hungry children’s mouths. There is no doubt in Amos’s statements on behalf of God, where God’s passion lies. It sides with the oppressed. And if God doesn’t immediately intervene on their behalf, nevertheless God swears, “Never will I forget a thing they have done!” Amos makes it clear, reckoning will come---which leads us into today’s gospel passage.

Chapter 16, in Luke's Gospel, is almost exclusively devoted to his teaching about possessions. This has been a major concern for Luke. Today's selection has a parable followed by several loosely related teachings. The parables in the Gospel generally come to us intact, unchanged by the evangelist. However, it is the teaching after the parables and the context in which the parable is placed that reveal the emphasis and thematic concern of the gospel writer. Thus, Luke ties sayings about possessions onto the initial parable. We preachers will need to decide if we want to focus on the parable, or on one of the subsequent sayings. (Depending on which commentary you use, the attached sayings may begin with Jesus' question and response, "Why? Because the worldly take more initiative..." or, with his declaration, "What I say to you is this....")

The parable, like most parables, is dressed in secular garb. It is a tale about a manager who has either cheated his master or just not produced the expected profits. It's decision time for the manager and he has to act fast. His predicament in worldly affairs is an occasion for Jesus to address us. We too must make decisive and important decisions in our lives about him and the lives we live as his followers. We usually expect to hear calls to repentance, change of heart, and renewed commitment during Lent. But notice how frequently in the gospels Jesus calls for that decision. As if to say, "Consider who you are... where you are now... where you want to go... the kind of person you want to become—and do something about it." That's not a message for a particular season; it's Jesus' message for all seasons. He is calling for creative responses from those who hear his message. The parable tells us that time is shorter than we think, and an accounting may be asked of us at any moment.

Doesn't each day, in fact, call us to an accounting? "Give an account of your service...." Have we, like the manager, been dissipating what has been put into our care? There are many examples the preacher might use. Recall for people what life asks from us, what responsibilities we must face. In our various roles we tend to drift along, taking the days as they come, dealing with issues as they arise. When the going gets really rough and life requires some accounting, as it has the habit of doing of each of us, we try to scrap together our interior forces--- but it is too late. We have nothing to draw upon. We have coasted along too long and when we need the inner resources, we reach in and come up empty.

The enterprising one hears what Jesus is offering and seizes it. And along the way we nourish what has been given, we tend to the treasure entrusted us through prayer, the counsel of trusted advisers, worship, reflecting on the Word of God, etc. Confident in what has been given us through Jesus we enter into "enterprises" that express love, care and concern for others. Our tradition tells us that the greatest saints were and are the ones who took the biggest risks. If the

owner of the property could congratulate a “devious employee” for being enterprising, how much more does God delight in the very many ways Jesus’ disciples enter ventures that spread his message of love and care for others? Does the preacher know of any local people of faith who have ventured to help others or whose ventures have made an impact for the good in the local community?

One confusing aspect of the parable may need to be cleared up so that people don’t get sidetracked or bogged down. The steward seems dishonest. Jesus is daring and willing to use such a worldly example for his story. Some suggest the steward may be discounting his own commission from the debts. So, he is not being praised for his dishonesty, but for being shrewd and enterprising.

We certainly have similar examples in our time. We know people who work 60-, 70-, or 80-hour weeks to build their careers and financial standings. Jesus would not praise them for the imbalance in their lives but, as in the parable, he might hold them up as models of shrewdness and initiative. He is also asking us about where we put our best energies and whether or not we are investing ourselves in what promotes life and the well-being of ourselves and others.

Now a moment’s thought to the sayings that follow the parable. While money can be corrupting and a distraction that blinds us to the truly valuable goals we should be pursuing, verse 10 reminds us that we can and should use money to help others. (“Make friends for yourselves...”) Where should we be putting our “investments” then?—caring for the needy and those who lack. This gospel has already told us that the poor are blessed (6:20), has warned the rich that they already have their consolations (but only in this world, 6:24) and that they should “avoid greed in all its forms.” For the disciple of Jesus, the future has already been promised us. We keep that future secure by using “the world’s goods” on behalf of others. Just as shrewd people invest their money with their later years and retirement in mind so we, like the shrewd manager, need to take stock of our lives and make sure we have invested our time, talents and treasure with eternity in mind.

This passage enables the preacher, like Jesus, to refer to the very worldly and concrete realities of our times. Sometimes when I am writing a homily I will brainstorm for images and ideas that parallel the biblical ones. I “play” with my imagination and see what emerges. Make a list of what comes to mind from the financial terms and realities of our day and see how they fit into your preaching or suggest a central image for it. For example, here is what rushes to mind: nest egg, long-term investments, get rich schemes, C.D.’s, insurance plans, I.R.A.s, guaranteed annual returns, treasury bonds, the bull market, financial advisers, etc.

It is clear that for Jesus, money is not neutral, it does hold a power over us. When used wisely it can be of great help not only to our families but to others as well. However, it does have the power to distract and eventually to corrupt the disciple of Jesus. Nevertheless, money is a very vulnerable commodity since it can't guarantee our longevity, health or lifestyle. It certainly can't follow us into the grave. Some peoples have the custom of putting coins into the mouths of the recently deceased to help them pay their way into the next world. Can't be done. As the saying goes, "Shrouds don't have pockets". Consider the Egyptian kings who were buried with vast fortunes and materials, along with their wives and slaves—all for the next life. But what happened to all their wealth? It was plundered or is on display in museums around the world---this world. As the 14<sup>th</sup> century Turkish mystical poet Rumi put it:  
"Quit acting like a wolf and feel  
the Shepherd's Love filling you."

### **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:**

Sandra M. Schneiders, *WRITTEN THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE: ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1999. Paper \$24.95. 258 pages

An excellent book. Schneiders is a major biblical scholar, and John is one of her areas of specialty. These previously published essays take an approach the author describes as, a concern for symbolic narratives in the Fourth Gospel. It is also a spiritual guide that invites the reader to respond to Jesus' invitation to "dwell in my word." Concludes with a feminist reexamination of the authorship of this Gospel.

### **QUOTABLE:**

"Pastoral preaching is truth rising out of a compassionate heart and finding voice. It is truth taking on the flesh of words and deeds The pastoral preacher is a bearer of hope."

--Carla Mae Streeter, O.P. in, *DOMINICAN ASHRAM*

### **JUSTICE NOTES:**

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Therefore, everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family. This has been the opinion of the Fathers [sic.] and Doctors of the

church, who taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others.

Faced with a world today where so many people are suffering from want, the council asks individuals and governments to remember the saying of the Fathers: "Feed the people dying of hunger, because if you do not feed them you are killing them," and it urges them according to their ability to share and dispose of their goods to help others, above all by giving them aid which will enable them to help and develop themselves.

-----The Church in the Modern World, #69