



by Mary M. McGlone

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This week the scriptures invite us to consider profit and loss and grace. The prophet Amos, a rancher and orchard owner by trade, goes on the offensive against his wealthy colleagues who have, as Pope Francis would say, allowed the culture of prosperity to deaden them. They don't seem to comprehend the self-destructive power of their greed. They have permitted the collection of debts — perhaps as valuable as silver, sometimes as paltry as a pair of sandals — to blind them to human faces. They've become like Ralf, the Nazi officer in the 2008 film "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas," who did not understand that allowing a Jewish child to die made his own son equally vulnerable. Unlike the poor who know they must rely on one another, those lost in affluence can temporarily insulate themselves, but as God warns, material security is time-limited; only relationships last forever.

While Amos delivers his message in dire terms, Jesus uses enigmatic stories to trick his listeners into new patterns of thinking. Imagine the laughter that had to light up Jesus' eyes as he provoked chuckles with his table-turning tales. Case in point: the story of the cunning steward who was so steadfast in letting his stomach be his guide.

It's not by accident that Luke placed this story immediately after the parable of the wild younger son who was also criticized for squandering everything except his

comfort. There are a lot of details missing in this story — most importantly, why the master was careless enough to leave the steward free to feather his future with friend-winning deals. Obviously, Jesus wasn't concerned about such particulars, and he has his normal fun by spinning a yarn with extravagant details about debts of 875 gallons of oil or 100 acres' yield of wheat. Part of the message here is: "Think big!"

Jesus obviously wanted to shock pious moralizers with the steward. First a wastrel, then a cheat! Not at all like the servant who hid away the talents the master gave him, this steward carefully followed the example of his master, who prospered by the sweat of the debtors' brows. Before it got out that the steward had lost his debt-collector's badge, he had refinanced a fortune and probably lost all his commissions in the bargain. But he was gambling that social capital would offer more security than his job.

In a twist that makes more sense in Jesus' culture than in our own, the sacked servant left his master in a baffling predicament. Everybody would have been marveling at the owner's stature and munificence: Such debt cancellation was surely a sign of immense wealth and generosity! The debtors themselves would have been delighted with the deal and suddenly more loyal than ever. All that increased the master's prestige even as it diminished his profits. In a society that valued honor over material wealth, the master would have ended up losing more than he gained if he had attempted to recoup his financial losses. So Jesus, who always saw third and fourth alternatives to either-or situations, praised the servant who demonstrated that while money can't buy love, friendship engenders its own rewards.

What, then, is today's message about profit and loss and grace? This Gospel is not exactly calling us to cook the books or connive at Robin Hood schemes to shame the affluent into debt forgiveness. Jesus knew the prophetic message; he designed this story to poke at listeners of every social status. While most of us will never be in the position to manage (much less own) immense fortunes, we all need to figure out how best to use the resources and opportunities and — perhaps most particularly — the problems we have. When his behavior bore fruit in lemons, the steward brewed up enough lemonade for everybody in the story!

Today's selection from the First Letter to Timothy calls us to pray for everyone in our world. That's not because prayer changes God's will but rather opens us up to it. Genuine, ongoing love of neighbor is more than we can sustain alone. Prayer reminds us that we come from God, that each moment is touched by the Incarnation

and that our destiny is union in and with God. Prayer opens us to grace, allowing the Spirit to engender in us love that recognizes the image of God in each face. The same Spirit who inspired Jesus will lead us to see the third, fourth and fifth alternatives that can transform the divisions between rich and poor, male and female, neighbor and stranger. Even if, like the steward and the prodigal son, it's our own need that moves us toward our neighbors, solidarity with them puts us all on the road toward the kingdom.

AMOS 8:4-7

Woe to the professionals who have one of their own turn prophet! They will come in for a double measure of censure. That's the predicament of the well-to-do that Amos addresses in today's first reading. Amos came to prophecy from being the owner of flocks and orchards. He knew the business world of his day. He was in a position to be the perfect insider critic, and that he was.

Amos saw through the duplicity of his contemporaries. Outwardly they were people of the covenant who observed the Sabbath and holy day laws. On the inside, they missed the point entirely. The Sabbath had become a hindrance instead of being the weekly festivity reminding us of our origin and destiny in God and celebrating the fact that we are much more than the work of our hands and the money in our pockets. The desire for much had blinded people to the more God had in store. (See *Laudato Si* #123.)

That was their loss, but Amos' focus went beyond critiquing them because they settled for the paltry existence of having and acquiring. What really infuriated Amos was the effect wealthy people's blind greed had on the poor. There are few indictments in our scriptures more severe than his description of their conspiracy to "buy the lowly for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals."

Referring to laws that made debtors slaves, Amos exposed how the scales of justice are perennially weighted in favor of the haves. For the inability to pay even a small debt, a person could become a slave; a Hebrew man could be enslaved for seven years, but if a woman was made a wife of either slave or master, hers was a life sentence. (See Exodus 21:1-11.)

Amos framed the injustice as a violation of the spirit of the Sabbath because the Sabbath was intended as the time for clearing one's vision and reversing injustice. It

was the time to remember the meaning of life as a gift from God and a path toward God. The laws of Sabbath and the Jubilee periodically readjusted social inequity by forgiving all debts and freeing all Israelite slaves. (See Deuteronomy 25.) As the Sabbath had become nothing more than a hindrance to the merchants, the poor had devolved into nothing more than a means to their ends. While formally observing Sabbath, they violated everything the covenant implied. God, says Amos, will never forget.

1 TIMOTHY 2:1-8

This selection from 1 Timothy seems to have little to do with the first and third readings. It focuses on prayer and on intercessory prayer in particular. The introduction to 1 Timothy in the reading guide of the New American Bible explains that while it is presented as a letter from Paul to his protégé, Timothy, it is probably a later work written for the whole community after the deaths of Paul and Timothy. As such, it gives us a sense of how Christians of the early second century recalled the teaching of the past to ground their present life in a vision of its ultimate meaning. Reading this letter inserts us, too, into the historical trajectory in which the distant past situates us in our moment and orients us toward the fulfillment of God's future.

The early church was dealing with issues of how to survive as a "pagan cult" in the midst of the Roman Empire, and that motivates the injunction to pray for everyone, including the authorities. Since monotheistic Christians and Jews would not pray to the popular gods, praying *for* the quasi-divine emperor allowed them to appear non-subversive. Nevertheless, their prayer ultimately made a clear theological declaration that God is beyond all earthly powers and that God's will trumps the empires.

All of that is fine in its historical context, but we need to ask what the reading says to us about intercessory prayer. Put most simply, we might ask what difference our prayer makes: Will the world be different because we pray for others or neglect to do so?

According to today's reading, the first rationale for praying for others is "This is good and pleasing to God, who wills everyone to be saved." That implies that prayer for others is a way of opening our hearts to share God's desire for the best for each and every person. Such openness is a gesture of love for God and an impetus to be

generous toward others. Secondly, praying for the powerful is a statement of faith in God's sovereignty; praying for anyone recognizes that both we and the one prayed for are dependent on God. Praying for rulers is a reminder of what Jesus told Pilate: All earthly power is relative.

One other dimension of prayer implied by all this is that it situates us not only in our own relationship with God, but in the whole of salvation history. We pray because we believe that the God of Israel and of Jesus is faithful and wills the best for us; our prayer reminds us of that faith. We pray because we believe that our Creator God remains attentive to history, that God is present to our every moment and listens to our prayer. Finally, the prayer that joins our heart to God reminds us of where we are headed, of the union of all in and with God that is the future awaiting the whole of creation. Thus, our prayer consecrates the time of our life, bringing past and future to bear on the present moment, leading us to perceive how full of grace creation really is.

LUKE 16: 1-13

In this odd parable we hear Jesus, the preacher who eats with sinners, applaud the cleverness of a seeming scoundrel. It can't be by accident that Luke used the same word for the steward's activity as he did for the younger son who "squandered" the inheritance he got from his ever-loving father. Neither of them did the right thing with the property that had been entrusted to them. On the other hand, neither of them was accused of actual stealing or even of breaking any law. In addition, the steward, not so unlike the wastrel son, got smarter once he was in trouble. They both figured out how to finagle mercy from someone — be it the forgiving father or the forgiven debtors. Both stories leave the one in authority looking like the chump. Like the merciful father, the master didn't rebuke or imprison the steward but actually commended him for being smart enough to know how to insure his future. It's enough to infuriate the righteous! And that was one of Jesus' favorite sports.

Perhaps it helps to understand the cultural setting for the story. A steward could have been a slave or an employee. In either case, someone with such responsibility would have been close to the master and smart enough to be entrusted with serious obligations. The details of the debts he handled indicate that the master was a landowner with immense holdings, probably leased out with a rent plan based on production rather than cash. The steward's responsibility was to collect the renters'

debts along with a variable commission. While that allowed some flexibility in the terms, this steward went far beyond the normal bounds in rewriting the contracts.

What did Jesus' audience hear in the story? They understood the system and the inequalities it supported. There was a rich man and the folks who supplied his wealth by working his land. Then there was the go-between steward, the only one who knew both sides and whose official position was to represent the owner. But when his fortunes changed, so did his focus. Maintaining loyalty to himself before all else, he figured out that helping the little guy would put him in good stead.

What the modern Western culture misses in this storyline is the new position of the master. He's lost some of his profits — products that cost him no sweat — but his tenants are celebrating the fact that they have a little left over. Sure, he could collect the original sums, but that would cost more in goodwill than it would gain in wheat and oil. So, with a grin-and-bear-it attitude (keep calm and carry on), he congratulated the servant who had proven far cleverer than anyone anticipated.

As far as the steward was concerned, even as his priority was his belly, it eventually led him toward relationships of reciprocity, which have much more Gospel potential than commercial dealings based on the profit motive. Jesus sums up his lesson saying, "Use filthy lucre to make friends because friendship promises a greater rate of return than money can buy. You cannot serve both God and mammon, but money can be put to good use!" Jesus didn't say the servant was a model disciple, but he was as much on his way toward being so as the prodigal son who had returned home looking for food and shelter. With such small beginnings, God can do the rest.

Planning: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday is designated in the United States as Catechetical Sunday, a day to recognize and commission those who are involved in the various catechetical ministries of the parish. Materials are available online at www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/index.cfm.

Planners need to decide just how broadly to interpret the title "catechist." Certainly it should include all those who have a formal catechetical role in the parish. So

include RCIA catechists and other adult formation leaders with the catechists of children.

Those who think broadly about how the faith is transmitted may be inclined to include everyone in the parish, since we all bear the responsibility of witnessing to our faith and sharing it with others. Yet that runs the risk of making the observance rather meaningless. If everyone is a catechist, how do we recognize those who take on the formal roles?

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' site for this observance, however, suggests acknowledging parents: "Parents are truly the primary catechists of their children. They prepare the soil and plant the first seeds of faith. On Catechetical Sunday, we not only highlight the work of catechists in parishes and schools, but we also commend parents and guardians and encourage them to take seriously their role of making their Catholic households a place where faith is passed on to the next generation. This is why the rite of blessing of catechists used on Catechetical Sunday includes an optional blessing of parents and guardians."

That extra blessing is optional, so planners should decide how adding it will be received by the assembly. The pastor and the director of religious education might be involved in that discussion, too. If you choose not to use the extra blessing, the presider might reference the role of parents in the homily or at the beginning of the blessing of the catechists.

The message from Archbishop Leonard P. Blair on the U.S. bishops' website suggests spending time reflecting on prayer in our lives. Planners might discuss what can be done to encourage prayer among members of the assembly. This might include looking at how the assembly prays at worship, as well as what other forms of prayer are part of parishioners' lives. The communal prayer that we call liturgy assumes a daily life of personal prayer. People who think that one hour on Sunday is their only time for prayer will likely be frustrated because the liturgy does not offer enough chances for individual prayer. Both sides of the equation are essential: individual and communal. What can you do to encourage both?

Prayers: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

My friends, we so often find ourselves confronted with conflicting values and demands. Today we ponder how to balance our call to discipleship with our culture's call to accumulate wealth and material things. We hear that God is aware of both greed and the needs of the poor. Discipleship challenges us to be prudent, wise, focused and balanced in our interaction with money. It's not easy. Keeping our eyes on the final prize is what really matters.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you recognized your disciples' attraction to worldly goods: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught them that money is to be used wisely: Christ, have mercy,
- Lord Jesus, you call us to serve God and others above all: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray now for all our brothers and sisters, regardless of their worldly possessions.

Minister For the church: that it may inspire and guide us in our wise use of worldly goods ... we pray,

- For the poor, the homeless, the starving, the marginalized and forgotten; for all who struggle with daily life ... we pray,
- For the ability to commit fully to our calling to discipleship ... we pray,
- For hearts that are forgiving toward those who cheat us or treat us dishonestly ... we pray,
- For the ability to forego things we do not need and use our money wisely ... we pray,
- For children and youth struggling with dishonesty or coveting what they cannot have ... we pray,
- For the attention of our political candidates to the needs of the poor and disenfranchised ... we pray,
- For those among us struggling with money; for the sick and dying; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God who knows our hearts, you call us to remember the needs of the poor at all times. Help us as we struggle with the challenges of living in a society that values money and success. Make us wise and prudent, so that we can be faithful to our commitment to follow Jesus. We pray in his holy name. Amen.

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