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Today's Gospel reminds me of the movie "[Waking Ned Devine](#)." It's a story about Irish villagers colluding to collect the lottery prize won by one of their neighbors who died of shock when he discovered that he had won. As in Jesus' stories, the goodness of less-than-honorable people outshines the moralistic virtue of the law abiders.

This touches on what Amos tells us today. Amos, a farmer/shepherd from the kingdom of Judah, was sent north to prophesy to Judah's rival, the kingdom of Israel. The unfortunate country-boy prophet was supposed to proclaim his message to rulers, clergy and wealthy urbanites.

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Amos 8:4-7

Psalms 113

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Luke 16:1-13

As an outsider, he had the "advantage" of clearly perceiving the injustices the locals tolerated because they had become an unimpeachable norm. Amos preached with poetic fire, reviling the privileged who maintained legality as they beat the poor into destitution.

Amos prepares us for Jesus' story about the hacienda owner and his trickster CFO. In this tale, the boss, who apparently made his fortune lending out land in return for (over)payment in produce, learns that his manager was less than devoted to increasing his master's fortune. Jesus doesn't say whether the manager was inept or dishonest, but the owner decided to call for an audit and send the guy packing.

That's when the debt-collector-for-hire initiated a new, creative management strategy.

Both boss and steward knew that the tenant farmers' debts would probably never be paid in full. A drought, floods, a plague of insects and other all-too-normal catastrophes regularly ruined sharecroppers' chances of getting out of debt. Here's where the manager proves that he's smarter than the boss gave him credit for.

He calls in the people defaulting on their loans and offers them a discount in return for immediate payment. The genius of the situation is that the new payment is within the means of the debtors, it brings otherwise unobtainable income to the owner, and it puts the manager in good graces with both sides. It's an ethically questionable situation of win-win and win!

Was Jesus accepting the trickery in light of the results? It rather seems so. First, explaining the manager's activity, Jesus advises, "Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon." (Mammon, according to Scripture scholar Jesuit Fr. Silvano Fausti, is surplus money — more than one needs to live decently.)

A few lines later, Jesus warns, "You cannot serve both God and mammon." Jesus seems to be saying that mammon has questionable value in itself, but can and should be used to do some good.

In his encyclical [*Fratelli Tutti*](#), Pope Francis makes this same point. He looks to St. John Chrysostom, one of the Fathers of the Church who taught: "Not to share our wealth [think mammon] with the poor is to rob them and take away their livelihood. The riches we possess are not our own, but theirs as well."

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Francis also cites St. Gregory the Great, who said, "When we provide the needy with their basic needs, we are giving them what belongs to them, not to us."

Some may call Chrysostom naive or a socialist. In his own day, he was [exiled by the Empress Eudoxia](#) who refused to tolerate his critiques of the lavish life of the clergy and court. Nevertheless, his ideas reflect Jesus' own teaching and have been recontextualized in Catholic social teaching.

There's no getting around it, as Luke moves toward the climax of his Gospel, his emphasis on reverence for the life and thriving of the poor only grows stronger. Today's Gospel, praising the wily manager, is a gentle introduction to what will be

coming later.

Let us return to Francis. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, he wrote *Fratelli Tutti* as a reflection on the solidarity that humanity could have created when faced by our common vulnerability. Francis described the pre-COVID world as one that, perhaps like the hacienda owner, fed on dreams of grandeur and consumed distraction, insularity, and solitude.

Francis' prescription for such a world goes to the heart of the wily manager's methodology. He calls us to cultivate a shared passion and a community of belonging and solidarity "worthy of our time, energy and resources." It's that simple and that challenging.

We might take that last idea as the takeaway from today's Liturgy of the Word. Amos demonstrates how to look at reality with eyes that perceive how our societal norms grant excess to some, leaving others to languish. Is it not time to ask which of our social systems are truly worthy of the respect they are given in the law? When the unrighteous manager went around the law, might we say that he advanced a community of solidarity? Might Jesus just tell us, "Go and do likewise?"