

Fifteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Sabbath & Sanctuary, Shops & Shekels:
Sunday Worship & Weekday Faith"
Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13
September 21-22, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Les Miserables: "Les Mis." Some of you have enjoyed the Broadway play, or watched the movie with Russell Crowe and Anne Hathaway, or maybe even read the book (by Victor Hugo). The Thenardiers are a ruthless couple who excel at making a dishonest buck. At the beginning of the story they're innkeepers. In "Master of the House" Monsieur Thenardier sings (tongue-in-cheek) about the excellent service they provide to weary travelers. Then in an aside he tells the true tale:

Master of the house, keeper of the zoo
Ready to relieve them of a sou or two
Watering the wine, making up the weight
Pickin' up their knick-knacks when they can't see straight

Charge 'em for the lice, extra for the mice
Two percent for looking in the mirror twice...

Food beyond compare
Food beyond belief
Mix it in a mincer and pretend it's beef
Kidney of a horse, liver of a cat
Filling up the sausages with this and that....

That's pretty much the level (the absence) of honesty being practiced by business people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel when Amos was prophesying, as we hear in our first lesson. Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

*Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak,
you who treat poor people as less than nothing...
Who give little and take much,
and never do an honest day's work.
You exploit the poor, using them—
and then, when they're used up, you discard them.*

*God swears against the arrogance of Jacob:
"I'm keeping track of their every last sin."
(Amos 8:4-7)*

Amos was an interesting fellow. As with so many of the prophets, he didn't go out looking for the job. He was collared by the Lord so didn't have much of a choice, similar to Jeremiah. Amos didn't have any prophetic credentials you'd recognize. He describes himself as "*a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.*" (Amos 7-14) His sycamore trees then and there weren't like our sycamores here and now. The sycamore trees he worked with were wild fig trees. To dress them meant to gash the fruit with a knife to make it ripen more quickly. Wild figs weren't the equivalent of juicy clementines or ruby red grapefruit or honey crisp apples or buttery avocados. They were the food of the poor. Amos' clientele was the poor. I'd say the fact that the Lord chose him as prophet, spokesperson for the divine, is a pretty good tip that Amos was **not** cheating his customers, inflating prices, doing **any** shady sleight of hand to make a quick buck.

Amos clearly cared deeply about the poor and took exception to those who took advantage. We're not just talking the guy at the gas station who keeps part of the change you're owed. We're talking cheating people to the point that they can't pay their bills, they're evicted from the land on which they make their living, they're thrown into debtor's prison, and their wife and children are enslaved – for a debt as small as the price of a pair of sandals. (Amos 8:6)

The interesting thing is that Amos was preaching to people who lived in the first half of the 8th century B.C. (so think between 800 and 750 B.C.), a time when Israel was at the peak of its geographic size and its economic power. Amos was preaching in the time of a bull market! Shopkeepers could have made a very good, **honest** living. But they were **greedy**. And they gave "not a fig" for the "have nots." And that made God's blood boil. In the verses leading up to today's reading from Amos, God shows Amos a basket and asks:

“What do you see, Amos?” I said, “A bowl of fresh, ripe fruit.” God said, “Right. So, I’m calling it quits with my people Israel. I’m no longer acting as if everything is just fine.” (Amos 8:1-2, The Message)

In other words, this fruit is so ripe that it’s about to turn the corner to rotten, and I’m going to pitch you into the trash like rotten fruit because that’s how you treat my children, the poor. What follows this prediction is the invasion of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The upper classes are hauled away into exile in Assyria, never to return – hence “the lost tribes of Israel.”

Then we’ve got Jesus telling a very strange story in today’s Gospel. It’s troubling unless you get the irony, the sarcasm in it. (Here’s a hint: whenever people are talking to themselves in Scripture, like the manager in this parable, it’s a sign they’re barking up the wrong tree.) What connection do you see between the 1st lesson from Isaiah and today’s Gospel?

- We’ve got dishonest, deceitful people in each one.
- They’re both illustrations of a famous verse from 1 Timothy 6:10: *The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.* Notice it doesn’t say, “Money is the root of all evil.” It says the **love** of money becomes the problem. If we’re willing to **lie** and essentially **steal** to gain more money, then money has become a supreme good in our lives, supplanting the God who commands us NOT to lie or steal and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When that’s the case, we’re guilty of idolatry, the worship of false gods, as surely as those children of Israel who danced and reveled around a golden calf in last week’s lesson.
- And think about this: there’s also an issue here about **splitting off our faith from our life**. In Amos the shopkeepers ask:

*“When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?”*

These dishonest businesspeople were weekly worshippers. They followed the rules of religion, but they made up their own rules when it came to business. Their faith didn't shape their life outside of the temple. One person has stated the lesson-to-be-learned this way:

...religion has to do not only with the sabbath and the sanctuary but also with the shops and the shekel.¹

Another has written:

They have one God on Sunday, and another on Monday;
the father of Jesus Christ when they pray,
and mammon when they work or play.²

After worship on Saturday night wise and faithful Nancy Sabo told me at the door that one verse contains the whole of these readings and of this message. She's right! Here it is:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

Amen.

¹James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah (Interpretation)*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), p. 120.

²¹*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 286.