



Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 22, 2013 C

MIXING CHURCH, POLITICS AND MONEY

Two things lots of people never want to hear about in church are money and politics. So often people will say: “I didn’t come to church to be talked to about money!” or “Leave politics out of the pulpit!” If the church *does* mix money, politics and religion, you can blame the prophets of the Old Testament. They constantly mixed all three—and so did Jesus.

Amos, often called the prophet of social justice, is called by God to preach a challenging word to the people of northern Israel where there exists a great dividing line between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-nots. Upon arriving in the north, Amos quickly notices that beautiful liturgies and great injustices subsist side by side. Amos is not impressed by the fancy liturgies in a society where a vast gap prevails between the poor and the rich. He writes:

***Spare me the din of your chanting,
let me hear none of your strumming on lyres,
but let justice flow like water
and uprightness like a never-failing stream.*** (5:23)

Commenting on today’s reading, Fr. Dennis McBride states:

Amos confronts the vast concrete problem of social injustice. He rails against those who can’t wait until the religious festivals are over until they can get back to their real devotion of exploiting the poor and the needy. What is the point of impressive liturgies that feed the egoism of the rich and powerful while keeping the poor as the permanent victims of an unjust system? When liturgy becomes the ally of oppression, it becomes an affront to God. When the worship of God remains wholly uncritical of what is happening in an unjust society, it becomes privileged theatre signifying nothing. For the prophet Amos, the best liturgical music is when justice sounds through the land.

Amos does not try to seduce his listeners with sweet reasonableness; he never saw the inside of a school of diplomacy. He is a countryman who speaks frankly and critically. He feels passionately. Through him God lends his voice to the agony of the poor who are plundered. He screams in protest. Long after everyone else has settled for compromise, the prophet still mourns the loss of fidelity. He hurts from the injustice he sees. His God does not accept that oppression is inevitable or that injustice should be tolerated. That is why Amos calls the people back to

wholeness of life and to solidarity as one people under God. They cannot enjoy the protection of God while living off the misery of poor people. Religion and greed cannot worship in the same pew.

A steward (manager) embezzles his boss’ money, and Jesus praises him. How come?

Parables are usually told to make *one* point. The main point of this parable is the surprising reaction by the master in praising instead of berating, his property manager for a job poorly done. The manager’s *decisive action* wins his masters approval.

Jesus could have chosen to focus on the poor job the manager did in overseeing his master’s property. Instead, he choose to focus on what the manager did to ensure that he had a good future.

The manager chose to lower the commission (perhaps a high commission) that was his due for overseeing the various properties of his master. In doing so, he believed his master’s tenants would welcome him and help him after he lost his job.

Commenting on the parable, scripture scholar Fred Craddock writes:

“Why should we be offended that Jesus found something to praise in a dishonest guy, for all of us are a mixed bag? Unsavory people do have some good qualities, even if it is hard for us to recognize them. The manager’s dishonesty, which Jesus didn’t commend, shouldn’t discolor everything else about the guy.”

Jesus seems to counsel his disciples and us that if children of the darkness are smart enough to use money to secure an *earthly* future, we ourselves should be skillful enough in our use of material goods so as to ensure our *heavenly* future. While we *cannot* buy our way into heaven, we can hope that the right use of money and material resources will place us in a favorable light before God.

One of the ways scholars look at Jesus’ words of praise for the dishonest steward is this: in a time of crisis, the steward took *decisive* action. In a similar way, disciples of Jesus should learn to take decisive action to ensure themselves a place in God’s kingdom.

How do we do that? By being responsible and generous stewards of all that the Lord has given us. In next Sunday’s Gospel, the rich man ends up in hell not because he was rich but because he failed to share his wealth with the poor.

Stewardship

Another way of looking at today's first reading and Gospel is through the lens of stewardship. In the first reading, the rich are being strongly condemned for being bad stewards of their material resources. And even though Jesus finds something good in the dishonest steward, we cannot but regard this character as a poster boy for how *not* to be a responsible steward.

Who is a steward?

In a Pastoral Letter called *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the U.S. Bishops describe the good steward as "one who receives God's gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others, and returns them with increase to the Lord."

The position of the steward is one of *trust* and *accountability*. All that we are and have are *entrusted* to us by our Lord to be developed and used wisely. At the end of time, we will have to give an *account* of our stewardship to our Lord.

The poor or lousy steward is one who sits on his gifts and does not care to develop them. Or if he does, he uses his assets for the sole purpose of expanding his empire, with little or no regard for the needy around him.

There are people who are multi-talented but have neither the time nor the wherewithal to develop their talents. Some individuals develop their talents and gifts through hard work. Others are "naturals" such as those we often see in the world of sports, music and art. In some cases, due to the demands of family, career or other reasons, a person is forced to put his/her special talent on hold for a while. Having said that, I know some people who are very busy, yet able to find time to share their gift, e.g., members of our music ministry who selflessly share with us their gift of song and music.

Key Question

In all this, the key question is: Do I see all that I am and have as a *gift from God* to be used to bless others, or do I perceive it as *mine* to be used as *I* please? In other words, to what extent have I developed a *stewardship* mindset when it comes to my life and my resources?

Naming some gifts/talents

• Many people who have the gift of music and song share it, but some do little or nothing with it. I am most grateful to those who share this gift with us at our Sunday liturgies. I am very aware that some of us are unable to share a particular gift because we are busy sharing our other gifts with the wider community.

• Some people have developed a gift for teaching children, teens or adults. I am thankful to those involved in our catechetical ministries. To others out there who have this gift and are in a position to share it, we will be happy to have you join one or more of our ministries. It is so *gratifying* to be able to share our gift with one or more of the communities we belong to.

• I am very appreciative of our volunteers who help maintain our facilities. Special thanks to Lee Dague and Joe Eisen who come in several days a week to do handyman chores, saving the parish a considerable amount of money. I am grateful to Warren and Marilyn Burton for looking after Mary's Garden. We would love to have someone help us with the upkeep of our Memorial Garden.

• Hundreds of other parishioners, too numerous to mention, have their own special gifts which they share with us in various ways.

• Lots of folks just want to help out in whatever way they can. Their particular service to the parish may not be their *primary* gift—which is okay—the main thing is that we are seeking to make a positive difference in our communities.

If you are not part of the action at Ascension and would like to be, I hope that you would contact us to see what we can do to get you plugged in. If you have tried unsuccessfully in the past to get involved, please try again.

In closing, I thank each and every one of you who do share with us your gifts of *time*, *treasure* and *talent*. Your generosity and service are what make our parish immensely blessed.

Have a blessed week,

