

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 September 2022

Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Gresham OR

The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Supply Priest

In the name of the one, holy, and living God. Amen.

As usual our collect today gives us an overview of the theme for the day, rooted in the Gospel. It speaks of loving heavenly things, Godly things, enduring things, and asks help for us not to be anxious about earthly things. We live in a time when anxiety is rampant. So it is not just a question of loving God or Mammon, the eternal or the ephemeral, spiritual health or financial security; it is a question of love and confidence or anxiety. Love focuses outward, makes connection; anxiety focuses inward. One brings health; the other does not. This is a good thing to think about in any time of transition.

Amos gives us a good beginning. He is angry at the selfish bad behavior of the leaders of his time, at their greed and self-seeking, and total disregard for the well-being of people in need, and the prophet makes it clear that God holds all the people who suffer close in divine love, and remembers all that is done to them and for them. Then the Psalm reminds us how God treats those in most need. God lifts them up, embraces them, and gives them joy. We see in these two readings evidence of what Hebrew Scripture scholars have called 'God's preferential love for the poor.' It is not so much that God sees the poor as more worthy, but rather more in need of love, more in need of lifting up. And since that is what God sees and feels, that is what the people of God are meant to see and feel. These are words of encouragement for all of us to share the heart of God and live out that love.

Then the epistle commends us to pray for everyone – even those in power, those who may be profiting from injustice and oppression, everyone, that all may be one with Christ, that all may have their hearts conformed to God's heart.

And that is what the Gospel reading is about – hearts. Several years ago in *Journey with Jesus*, my favorite source of reflections in the lectionary and Christian life in general, Dan Clendenin described today's parable as 'one of the craziest stories in the entire Bible.' It is indeed startling and brings us up short – what is Jesus saying? That we should all be crooks and buy our way to heaven? One thing that makes this a challenging reading is that so many of Jesus' parables begin "the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." or some such introduction, signaling that we are about to be given a glimpse into the heart and logic of God, so that is what we are primed to hear. But this parable intentionally does not begin this way, telling us instead that this is, as it says, a story about 'a rich man' - not about a story about the ways of God. This is a story about the ways of humans. The rich man and his manager are neither images of, nor spokespeople for, God. That is why it is not crazy.

The rich man discovers that his manager is squandering his property – the opposite of his job responsibility. So the rich man calls his manager on the carpet and tells him to close out the books because he is fired. The manager realizes that he is about to be thrown out with no way to earn his living (who will hire a manager fired for mismanagement?) So he considers how to feather his nest, to craft his own 'golden parachute'. He still has control over the books, so he discounts several loans with debtors whose gratitude he earns, hoping that they will reciprocate with hospitality in the lean days and years ahead. They are indeed surprised and grateful, even though they know that this is dishonest and means cheating the rich man, who is their legitimate creditor.

The rich man is not fooled. In fact, there is no indication that the bad manager made any attempt to hide his stratagem. In the most memorable line of the parable, the rich man "commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly". He does not want to keep such a person on his payroll, but he shares the man's values. Above all, they both value money, personal gain, personal security. So the rich man appreciates his dishonest employee's motivation and success.

Jesus goes on to comment that worldly people, ungodly people are much shrewder than godly people. It almost sounds as though he is saying we should be more like them, especially in the puzzling line, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

So are we being advised to cheat our employers, to embezzle, cook the books, take whatever we can? This might be the case if he were to say, "so they will welcome you into their homes", which was exactly the manager's stratagem.

But Jesus says, “when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” “When it is gone ...” If we think about this line, we realize, that Jesus is reminding us of his injunction to sell everything and give to the poor. And then, having shrewdly employed tainted money for the benefit of those in most need, as God wishes, we will be making friends for ourselves in God’s kingdom, and welcomed into the many rooms of God’s house, our ultimate home.

Jesus goes on to admonish us in three different ways about consistency. If honesty is important, it must be throughout our lives in everything we do. We cannot cheat our employer and then faithfully pledge to the church and think all is well. Honesty must characterize us throughout. Faithfulness is not merely a matter of worship and belonging, it extends to our financial dealings. How we deal with little things will determine whether we even have the opportunity to deal with big things.

Having said all this, Jesus sums up very directly: no one can serve two masters. Therefore, we cannot serve God and wealth.

The rich man and his manager were both faithful, unconflicted servants of wealth. It was their prime motivation, their primary loyalty. They understood each other and operated out of a consistent worldview. Jesus clearly says that this worldview is alien to God and the Kingdom of God. It separates us from our true selves and the life God wants for us. This should not surprise us, since throughout the Bible financial and power relationships are the things most often cited as separating us from God. That is what Amos is highlighting today – how the proper worship of God is seen as an inconvenience and interference by those focused on their personal gain, ignoring the needs around them.

In our creeds we use the word ‘believe’. We believe in God, in Christ, in the Spirit, and in the Church. And it is helpful to think of the root of that word ‘believe’ – which is ‘love’, In fact the Latin word it translates ‘credo’ has ‘card’ or ‘heart’ as its root, so I like to use a very simple form of the creed when preparing young people for baptism or confirmation, saying ‘I give my heart to God’ ‘I give my heart to Jesus’ ‘I give my heart to the Spirit’ ‘I give my heart to the church’. In giving my heart, I am allowing my heart to be conformed to God’s heart, so that whatever I do in my life will be informed by God’s concern for everyone, especially those in most need.

If I give my heart to wealth and financial security, then I am paving my path into the kingdom of anxiety. Remember how the collect presented us with the choice between the earthly (read selfish) and heavenly (sharing God’s concerns), between loving and anxiety. That is a valuable perspective in a time of change like this. I will conclude with some wonderful words from the poet WH Auden in the chorus from ‘For the time being’

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

May we all bravely journey through this time of anxiety, holding fast to God’s heart, God’s perspective, God’s invitation.

Amen.