

25th Sunday in Ordinary time, Cycle C

1st Reading: *Amos 8:4-7*

Amos prophesied during a time of real prosperity in the Northern Kingdom, under Jeroboam II. It seems obvious, from this prophecy, that the people cared more about the wealth of this world than God's law, especially God's concepts of justice. Some of his accusations might be hard to understand because they are actions of the ancient world. Basically, they are being accused of feeling that God's laws are in the way of their making money and of acting unjustly toward the poor. This is an excellent example of the prophet's job of proclaiming God's judgment on human actions.

2nd Reading: *1 Timothy 2:1-8*

This is a continuation from last week's reading. Remember that Paul is encouraging and teaching Timothy, a young man whom he has placed in charge of the Church at Ephesus. In instructing that the Church pray for everyone, Paul is pointing to the Christian duty to love all of God's children whether Christian or not, whether our countrymen or not, whether we agree with them or not. We can see this instruction acted out in our Mass at the Prayer of the Faithful, sometimes called the "Universal" Prayer.

Gospel: *Luke 16:1-13*

And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. Lk 16:8a

Here we go again, another Gospel that shakes our sensibilities; How can God commend dishonesty? This is one of those Gospels that requires an understanding of the historical setting, the culture in which it was uttered and the meaning of the ancient languages.

First, let's look at the job of the steward in the ancient world. The Jerome Biblical Commentary points out, "The manager, usually a slave born in the household, possessed great liberty and full responsibility. Like the tax collector, the manager must show a profit for his master, but he could also procure personal benefits perhaps by means of adroit loans and extravagant interest."¹ Pay attention to the fact that there were two elements to his job, making a profit for his master and making a living for himself.

Secondly, why is he called the "dishonest" steward? The use of that term makes us, I think, believe that he was stealing from his master's clients, or from his master. His actions in having his master's debtors cancel portions of their debt seems to reinforce this understanding of the term. But, does it mean that?

Remember that the dishonest judge of Lk 18:6 is called the judge of dishonesty. Neither he, nor the dishonest steward, were thieves in the sense of stealing goods or money. The judge's problem, like the steward's, was that he wasn't doing his job – handing down just sentences. The steward's problem

¹ Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. (1996). [*The Jerome Biblical commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 149). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

wasn't that he stole the master's goods but that he did not manage them properly. Maybe acting like a good steward, when, in actuality, he was not, is his dishonesty.

Remember, also, that the steward's job had two aspects in terms of gaining wealth, gaining wealth for his master and gaining wealth for himself. Possibly, when he was canceling peoples' debts, he was canceling the portion they owed to him. This interpretation is strengthened by understanding the proper interpretation of the comment "I know what I shall do" ^{Lk 16:4a} The Greek word we translate as "I know" is in the aorist tense and literally means "I have always known." Is it possible that he was conscious of the fact that he was "squandering" his master's property and knew he would eventually be found out? My guess is that he purposefully made a minimal amount for his master so that he could make an exorbitant amount for himself.

And why was he commended for giving money back? In our 21st Century culture, we value knowledge and skill in particular areas and business acumen. In the ancient world, shrewdness was highly valued. The emphasis here is on the use of shrewdness not on the moral value of the steward's actions. And, as I pointed out above, if he was canceling the part of the debt owed to him, his actions were morally neutral anyway. Why use such a mundane example? Because people could easily identify with it and apply to what Jesus wanted to teach.

So, what was he actually trying to teach when said, "I tell you, make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth²..." ^{Lk 16:9} The New American Bible Revised Addition suggests that he was teaching the same thing as in Luke 12: 33-34 where He is telling His disciples to sell all that they have, give to the poor and build up treasure in heaven. That could be, but I take this saying of Jesus as sarcasm. I think He was accusing the ones to whom He was speaking of being the same as the dishonest steward and warning them that they should figure out what they will do.

And to whom was He speaking? I was surprised to realize that He was talking to His disciples! Was He actually accusing His own disciples of being "dishonest" stewards? Was He accusing them of not doing their job? We are used to Him accusing the scribes and Pharisees but this time He is talking to His own disciples. Is He talking to us? Is this Gospel talking to us?!

The inclusion of the two wisdom sayings, Lk 16:10 about trustworthiness and Lk 16:13 about the master we serve, defines, somewhat, the accusation against some of the disciples. Either we can't be trusted with the responsibilities of the stewardship with which we have been entrusted or, we fail because we are duplicitous in our service. Jesus calls us to total commitment and singularity of purpose.

² "dishonest wealth" is literally translated as "mammon of dishonesty". Mammon is a transliteration to the Greek from Hebrew and/or Aramaic. It is usually explained as that in which one places his trust. The use of the term "dishonest" doesn't imply that the wealth was gained dishonestly but touches into the ancient-world belief that money is somehow always tainted.

Reflection:

“The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” Lk 16:10-13

Question:

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

Alternative:

Reflect upon/Share about your experience with trustworthiness in life, especially your own trustworthiness. Do you try to mix serving God and mammon? What are the conflicts you experience? What do you need to change to ensure that living in this world of mammon you can still serve God faithfully?

Verse by Verse:

This story, the parable (Lk 16:1-8a) and the teaching (Lk 16:8b-13), is placed here to connect it with the Prodigal Son story where he squandered the family's goods, the steward squandered his master's goods; the father of the family is God and the master is God.

The two wisdom sayings, Lk 16:10 about trustworthiness and Lk 16:13 about wherein one places his trust, were attached to this parable because the early Church, and Luke, saw a connection.

Luke 16:4a “I know what I shall do...” | The Greek word we translate as “I know” is in the aorist tense and literally means “I have known all along...” This implies that the steward had some prior consciousness of the poor quality of his work.

Luke 16:9 “dishonest wealth” is literally translated as “mammon of dishonesty”. Mammon is a transliteration to the Greek from Hebrew and/or Aramaic. It is usually explained as that in which one places his trust. The use of the term “dishonest” doesn't imply that the wealth was gained dishonestly but touches into the ancient-world belief that money is somehow always tainted.

Luke 16:8 “dishonest steward” would be translated literally as “steward of dishonesty”. It seems to me that the use of a noun dishonesty (*akirias*) rather than the adjective dishonest (*akiros*) is an attempt to connect it to “mammon of dishonesty” Both will eventually fail you.

Note that in the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Lk 18:1-8), the “dishonest” judge is literally translated the judge of “dishonesty”. This doesn't mean that he, or the dishonest steward, was a thief in the sense

of stealing goods or money. The judge's problem, like the steward's, was that he wasn't doing his job – handing down just sentences. The steward's problem wasn't that he stole the master's goods but that he did not manage them properly.

Lk 16:6 “a hundred measures of oil” and Lk 16:7 “one hundred kors of wheat” equaled 900 gallons of oil, about the yield of 146 olive trees and 1100 bushels of wheat, about the yield of 100 acres. This is an example of the Oriental story teller's delight in exaggeration, which Jesus has shown on more than one occasion.