

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 18

Money – Last week Jesus spoke of lost sheep and lost coins. Yes, they were stand-ins for lost people, but their value to the person seeking them was what made these stories work. Today will continue with a value theme but this time we will discuss money itself. We will have to decide if the money we are talking about is another stand-in or if it is straight up money talk. It sure sounds like the latter on the face of it, but I have found that the Bible is often not so simple.

But let's assume this really is about money and not what St. Lawrence famously named the "treasures of God," that is his people. Money talk and Church always makes us a little uncomfortable, especially when we are a Christian preacher. For those who serve a congregation, we are talking to the folks who write the checks that become our salary. That alone is enough to make us uncomfortable. The context doesn't help either. We are painfully aware of the success-Gospel types who promise their folks that if they just believe hard enough, pray hard enough, give enough, then God will reward you with material success. Philip Jenkins suggests that it is the great failing of the burgeoning churches of the global south. Indeed, for some of these guys, your material success is the measure of your faith. The poor are damned. This has a strong resonance with the first-century Jewish attitudes to which Jesus spoke.

On the other hand, we also have a bit of discomfort because we have probably all had the experience of serving or worshiping in a congregation which has struggled with a breach of financial trust. Pastors and business managers, principals and treasurers really can destroy a congregation if they lose the trust of the people, and one of the fastest ways for them to do it is to be fraudulent or even just sloppy with money. If we have not experienced that, there is a good chance that folks who are listening to us have. It creates a difficult wound that one really doesn't want to risk opening back up.

Money is just a difficult topic for the preacher any way you slice it. Any talk about money when my salary is the largest item in the budget cannot but sound self-serving. Who wants to do that? But the preacher cannot shy away from the subject of money. If he does, he puts himself outside just too much of the language of Scripture. Jesus regularly uses the monetary metaphors to describe his work. After all, even something as basic to our preaching as forgiveness is using a banking metaphor. Before it referred to what God does with sins, forgiveness was what bankers almost never do to a loan. Redemption was first about buying back a slave, and we still will see the word jumping out at us from our coupons when we are at the grocery store. We use money images all the time, but for many of us these have stopped being about money.

Compounding the problem, we are struggling in contemporary culture with the compartmentalization our lives. I mean the tendency to see our faith as something which affects our emotions and our morals, but not our finances, our jobs, our relationships, our homes, etc. It is as if we have a private, religious life that is separated from the life we live out in the world. But Jesus did not die to win an hour of your life on Sunday and maybe 10% of your paycheck. He died for the whole of your being, your every day, and your every dollar, all of it.

Thus we must preach the subject money sometimes, if not today, then another day. The final weeks of Series C will give us a number of opportunities. Money is a huge part of your people's lives, too large to ignore.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, keep Your Church in Your perpetual mercy; and because without You we cannot but fall, preserve us from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who live and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The Lord keeps the church in perpetual mercy. We thought the preacher looking at these texts might need this mercy especially. The readings are tough today, without God's merciful help we will fall! Does that mean the church and the preacher must always be perpetually in need of that mercy? I think so. Mercy is shown to the guilty, to the one who has no leg to stand upon. Yes, we cannot but fall without God. The very fact of our standing is an act of divine mercy. Like the prayer of a couple of weeks ago, this is built on an understanding that is alien to our world. We are in a position of weakness and fragility. We cannot stand on our own two feet. We are not independently sufficient. It is the great American delusion that we are able to be self-sufficient, self-contained, self-governing as an individual. Such is not true being. The old man hates to hear this and will continue to hate to hear it. Let the preacher beware. This is not safe. But also let the preacher be hopeful. This hard message prepares hard hearts for the Gospel and that is often fruitful and rich in its rewards.

Preserve us from all things hurtful. In a summer when we have seen horrific floods in Louisiana and just yesterday another shooting, this time in Texas school, our people probably don't need to wonder about that. At the same time we might ask what such hurtful things are. Are they external like the flood or shooter or are they internal? If they are internal, are they things which we do or things which we think? Are they things which happen to us or things which we do to ourselves? I would guess it is all of these, but I would be interested to know what we imagine such hurtful things really are and what they look like. We thought discord and anxiety might hurtful to us. Unresolved conflict, refusal to reconcile with members or a part of the community. Is it just anything that keeps us from the Word of God's promise, trusting in something other than God, and the failure to let him occupy the place of priority in our lives? Looking below we noted the many healthy things that are good for our salvation, is this the unhealthy, the narcissism, the greed, the covetousness, and the eagerness to gossip or lust? Are we asking God to save us from ourselves?

Lead us to all things profitable for our salvation. Yes, there are things that are profitable for our salvation. Chief among them must surely be the Word and the Sacraments in which Christ communicates his love to us. But these cannot be the only places that such profit comes to us. That is a reductionist, minimalistic view of God and Church. He has redeemed the whole of life. A devout and loving spouse, a community of family and friends in which love, discipline

forgiveness, and loyalty are expressed healthily, the beauty of music, art, and nature, a vocation in which I may put in a full day's work to receive a full day's wage, an education which enables me to understand in part the world, a hobby which I love, and so much more, are all profitable toward my salvation for they also become means for me to see God and for me to realize his blessings. God made/created the whole of our life and cares about every facet of it. Every part of our lives can be an occasion for God to lead us to those profitable things. This prayer might be read as based in a holistic understanding of life. God infuses the whole of life. They are the ways that this Jesus who comes to me in Word and Sacrament lives through me and gives life to the barren husk which sin had made of me.

And so the Church must needs be kept in perpetual mercy. Without help we will fall. Without the mercy of God, all families become places of power and not love, marriages are wracked by abuse, betrayal, and divorce, friendships become acrimonious, jobs become drudgery, and education is twisted to see the mind as a playground of ego, passion, and worse. Our possessions become simply measures of our human worth, not gifts and tools for the enjoyment of God. Even nature can become our deity. Without God's mercy, the church especially loses sight of its holy task so easily. The communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins are so easily replaced by a unity which is understood in the terms of a constitution and handbook, voters meetings become the real church and not the worshipping community. Budgets and boards replace service to the little and least. These structures can be great resources to help the church be Church, or they can subtly replace it with administrative minutiae and the people of God get lost in the power struggles and the shuffle of paper.

We need God, it is just too easy to fall into that. His mercy is all that will keep us from making a total mess of this.

Readings

Amos 8:4-7

¹ *This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit.* ² *And he said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me,*

"The end has come upon my people Israel;

I will never again pass by them.

³ *The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,"*
declares the Lord GOD.

"So many dead bodies!"

"They are thrown everywhere!"

"Silence!"

⁴ *Hear this, you who trample on the needy*
and bring the poor of the land to an end,

⁵ *saying, "When will the new moon be over,*

that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,
⁶ that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
“Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

⁸ *Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who dwells in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?”*

I have included some verses for context. Notice the first verses in this chapter. Amos sees a bowl of ripe fruit and that launches God into a gruesome description of what will happen. The word for “bowl of fruit” in Hebrew is a pun on the word for destruction/desolation. They sound very similar. For some reason this appealed to the Hebrew sense of humor and propriety. It was a device which was effective and it worked for them. We tend to see such punning as a rather cheap witticism, but they did not.

The image which God paints for Amos is dramatic. Dead bodies piled up everywhere and silence! This is what happened in the exile. It was not a happy trip to another land. It was a brutal conquest, pillage, rape, and murder by an invading army. Look to the Middle East today and the horrible pictures of the children bombed and gassed by Assad and his allies or the Coptic Christians wailing over their dead in Egypt and you get a sense of the emotional content here.

But Amos was painting this picture in advance. He proclaimed in a day of prosperity and plenty, when things were looking good and the Assyrian threat to the north and east looked distant, even impossibly distant. God had shown Amos that it would come, and it did come, rather quickly. After the current king things degenerated rather quickly. The final years of Israel involved lurching from one crisis to another, and soon the Assyrians were there, thousands and thousands of them, eager for plunder and more.

Amos was a southern man, a wealthy man, the word they use for “shepherd” to describe him is not normally the one used for the lackey. This is a guy who has a huge ranch. This word is used to describe the Moabite king. Some have wondered if this suggests that Amos was something of a sheep magnate. Of course such subtlety in a language is difficult when no one still speaks it, so one has to exercise a little caution here.

God had called Amos from the extreme southern end of Judah to a ministry of prophetic proclamation in the Northern Ten Tribes, Israel. They hate him. A few years ago two state senators in Colorado were voted out of office. In the analysis of that election, one of the commentators said the worst thing that happened to the two senators in their bid to retain their offices was a huge gift from the mayor of New York City. The perception of someone telling Coloradans how to vote or what to do fired up a certain segment of the electorate there. Likewise in Israel, the people of the north told Amos to go home. Interestingly, Amos agrees and he says that he wants to go home but God has sent him so he can't.

He also comes to Israel in a moment when it is experiencing a period of unprecedented economic boom. Jeroboam II was king when the Assyrians were in decline and the economic alliance with the Phoenicians to the north really started paying off. It was a gilded age of sorts. They drank subtle wines while lying on ivory beds and wore their beautiful jewelry. But Amos will call their women "cows of Bashan." He will say they sell a man for a pair of sandals (Nikes or Adidas?) and that this is a symptom of their spiritual sickness. They have forgotten the covenant.

This passage and others like it would factor mightily into the ministry and work of Christ. From the perspective of exile, the people of God did finally perceive that they had offended their covenant relationship with God. Their sin had led to the brutality of the exile in Babylon and the scattering of most of God's people to the winds. Only the tribe of Judah, for the sake of the promise made to David, had been preserved. (Which is why we call all the Israelites today "Jews" of course – they are almost exclusively of the tribe of Judah. The others are gone.) The post-exilic interpreters of the Law will read this and similar passages from Amos and see the reason that their forefathers were sent into exile and they will try to rectify that. They will not repeat the mistakes of their fathers. But in their pursuit of what God commanded they neglected what God promised, and thereby became "terribly right." God's Torah, the "way" into which he had called them with all its laws, was truly a way of mercy and justice. But they had forgotten it in Amos' day, and went into exile. They forgot it again in Jesus' day, and we will hear His words on that. It is deceptively easy for us to forget it today. Jesus called them and us back to the reality which Amos saw and they missed. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. You can keep the law and in keeping it exactly break the spirit of that law at the same time. You can keep the law and observe the new moon festival but at the same time long for it to be over because your heart is completely devoured by your greed. Your longing is a terrible betrayal of what you really are and the real goal or telos of your life. They go to Church but while they are there they plot how to make the ephah small and the shekel great, in other words cheating their customers.

Jesus will summon the folks of his day, through the Sermon on the Mount and other places in Scripture back to the call of Amos. Have a care for the things that God says are important and at the top of his list are always the people, especially the folks in the greatest need. We dare not sell the poor for a pair of Nike's, even if it hurts to pay someone an honest day's wage to make them for us. Amos calls upon us to think about the guy who made our shoes. He or more likely she was

probably a peasant farmer in China who left his home and family to work in a factory in some distant, polluted city. So we can afford this shoe, what price must he or she pay? Does Amos speak to this today? It is a question which can trouble us if we think about it too much. But shouldn't it trouble us? Does it matter if the poor man thinks making my shoes is a step up from the poverty of his farm?

I risk sounding like some bleeding heart liberal here (God forbid!) I believe in the power of working hard and that the man who takes the job to get his kids an education is doing a great thing and we should honor him and not pity him, even if it is a job I would never take, even if he is making what I think is a lousy salary. Hard work is a good thing and poverty is not a sin. But at the same time, I cannot buy those shoes without wondering and sometimes I hear Amos in the back of my mind when I see that "made in China" label on there or everywhere else that I see it. What about that man or woman who made this thing. What is their life like? Would I want that for my children?

I am thus haunted by the last and terrible sentence in this reading. God will never forget the deeds of his people. What about my deeds? Is even the computer screen I am using as I type this the result of some environmentally disastrous process that is destroying a village somewhere?

We thought that we could not beat ourselves up too much about this. Is the glue which binds my bible together produces in some process that has hurt someone? I don't know. We can make too much of this. At the same time, Amos asks us to think about it. It would seem the first place to start is not with some global reality, but with the guy whom God brings across our path. We need to start somewhere and it would seem that best we start with the local, the person next door, the man or woman whom God has led immediately into our lives. Start living justly there. Amos speaks of people who are knowingly and deliberately cheating people with dishonest scales. That is not an international trade situation; that is simply theft. Although, one has to admit that the ancient Israelite grain was traded by their Phoenician (Canaanite) trading partners as far as Spain and North Africa at this point in history. That is how the prosperity of Israel in the days of Jeroboam II happened.

Psalm 113

Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD!

² Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore!

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the LORD is to be praised!

⁴The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!
⁵Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
⁶who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
⁷He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
⁸to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
⁹He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

If you take the final words of my commentary on Amos to heart, this Psalm might be quite important. Notice how the Psalmist encompasses the whole of humanity, not just the nation of Israel. His praise is sung from the rising to the setting of the sun (vs. 3). The Lord's reign is high above all the nations (vs. 4). But God's lofty reign is noted not for its grandeur and power, but for its mercy shown to the poor and needy. God lifts them to sit with princes and gives the barren woman both home and joy with children, completely reversing her affliction.

If you are tempted to preach the OT lesson with Amos' stern injunction that economics cannot be disconnected from faith and theology, this passage raises some interesting and even disturbing ideas. The poor man who makes our shoes is certainly on God's radar. We need to have a care in how we would treat him, for God will raise him up to sit with princes in God's time. It would be good to be his friend.

For the preacher who has in mind to preach the Amos text, reflection on the Psalm or its use as an element in the sermon might be something to consider.

I Timothy 2:1-15

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. ⁷For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

⁸I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with

modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire,¹⁰ but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness.¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve;¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

So, I wonder if any of you thought you were going to avoid the tough Gospel lesson by preaching the Epistle lesson? Hmm... I wonder if the women in his parish are going to like what he has to say. If they have drunk deeply of the well of modern anthropology and sociology, there is a good chance they will hear what Paul says here and be angry. For the preacher with a 15 minute window of opportunity to address these things, this text presents a serious challenge. The first paragraph of the text is wonderful, but how does one focus there when members of the congregation are seething because of what Paul said in the second paragraph?

I believe that Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus here as much as he is to Timothy himself. This letter really sounds like something that was intended to be read at the man's ordination/installation service. It is a public letter in that sense.

He knows that Timothy has a tough job in front of him. Paul himself had spent some time here in Ephesus, longer than any other single place in his missionary journeys, perhaps three years. He seems to have been imprisoned and occasioned at least one riot while he was there. It is from Ephesus that he writes first Corinthians to the troubled folks in Corinth.

Paul may well be couching his words to a specific context for the people of Ephesus. He may be contrasting the worship of God's Christian people over against the ecstatic worship of the cult of Artemis which dominated the religious scene. For Paul this would have been especially important since Artemis and Asherah were probably the same deity, at least in his mind. Baal and Asherah worship in the Old Testament Canaan always had a certain Hugh Heffner feel to it and that may well have obtained in the environs of Ephesus as well. We know that this cult used a number of women priestesses and they were served by a large body of eunuchs. It was a classic fertility cult which most likely was still making use of cultic prostitution. As a rabbinically trained Jew, Paul would have easily recognized the very Baal worship that had gotten the Old Testament folks sent off into an exile. It would have been very offensive to him, and to a great number of people in the ancient world, but still wildly popular in some quarters. I am reminded of much of what happens today. There is not a particular sin to getting tattoos, piercings, and implants, but do we really want that in our preacher? There may come a day when it is OK, but I am not sure that it is there yet.

Paul's admonition to a sober, spiritual, and yet reverential sort of worship that focused on men raising their hands in prayer may have been addressed to this climate in which the alternative was a cult led by a priestess who was scantily clothed and served by emasculated men.

Does that mean that Paul forbidding women to lead worship is limited to Ephesus? Probably not. He says much the same thing to the Corinthians. We also know of no female presbyteroi or espiskopoi in the ancient church. That said, there is the difficult issue of Junia being listed among the apostles in Paul's letter to the Romans. Is this a man with a feminine name? Not unheard of, do you know a guy who has a girl's name? But then there is also the issue of the woman who delivered and most likely read Paul's letter to the Romans to the congregation there, the Deaconess Phoebe. She would have read Paul's letter aloud in the Roman congregation. Was she engaged in delivering a "sermon" that day? Just what was that and how does that shape the way we read this statement from the letter to Timothy.

The role of women in the church is not a simple subject but many have tried to make it so. Too often preachers who thought they were proclaiming the truth, have told bright, capable, and gifted women that their service is not wanted. I don't think that is what the preacher meant to say, but that is what those women have heard. It hampers the mission of the Church, it grieves the body of Christ, and it has no place in the preaching of a Lutheran congregation.

You may find much more interesting Paul's words at the beginning of the text where he describes God. I think the preacher would do well to focus attention there. God wants all people to be saved. That's a sermon that should write itself and if you are going to talk about the role of women, that is the place to start with this text. That is the revealed will of God. He may not have revealed a plan for your life that involve whether you take that job or not, he may or may not have a plan for your next week, but he surely has a plan for this planet. He wants to save them all.

And then at the end, that strange comment that women will be saved through childbirth. This does not mean that they will be saved by giving birth, it means that God will save them during childbirth. Remember that before modern medicine having a child was a very risky thing. Many women and their babies died in the process. Paul is offering help for a real problem.

Luke 16:1-15

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.² And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'³ And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.⁹ And I tell

you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

¹⁰“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

¹⁵ And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Notice that this parable is specifically told to the disciples, not the sinners/tax collectors and Pharisees who were the audience of the prior three parables.

Here we are with the monster. As soon as you get one idea of what this parable means, you read another verse and it all collapses. Jesus tells this parable about the unfaithful steward who cheats his boss and then gets commended for it. Jesus says we should use our unrighteous wealth to make friends with people so they will welcome us into eternal dwellings. Money is definitely the theme here and Jesus appears to be calling upon us to make stark choices.

It seems the key to understanding this difficult text is our understanding of just what is unrighteous wealth? Is it worldly wealth? Do we use it here on earth for what? How does it help us win points with the folks who are going to welcome us into eternal dwellings (heaven?)

Is the “unrighteous money” actually the treasure we have which we don’t deserve (unearned)? What treasure do all of us have which is “unearned?” Do we actually give away the treasures of God, like this scoundrel steward? Is this a form of a really negative image which Jesus uses to convey the mystery of the gospel? Is this parable really about forgiveness? If you understand it flowing out of chapter 15, it might make more sense that way. Robert Capon saw it that way.

So how does that play into the service of God or Money? What does money demand? What does God demand of us? Money is all about making the accounts balance. God is about grace, mercy, and gift, which is not earned, a totally scandalous way to do business. If we serve money, we demand that the scales all balance, there is no forgiveness in this. If we serve God, it is all about grace, the scales just don’t balance.

There seems to be a number of ways to go here. We have looked at this text for multiple cycles now and several ideas have been surfaced and rejected.

The Rejects

1. *Mission Text – We thought it did violence to the text to turn “make friends who will welcome you into heavenly dwellings” into a rationale for supporting missions.*
2. *Make the parable palatable – downplaying the chicanery of the manager so he seemed to be a guy who was just reducing debts so he could get something out of the deadbeats with the result that he helped his boss and the debtors seemed out of step with the parable and Jesus’ own interpretation of it. I must say, however, that Capon runs this way.*
3. *Negative example – like the persistent widow or the father who gives his children a scorpion or a snake, this read of the parable says that if even a terrible fellow like this gets something good, imagine what will happen to you if you are faithful. Again, this just did not jibe with how Jesus seems to see this. In years past we did not think this was good.*
4. *The manager is actually a positive example of someone who in his extreme situation stopped serving himself, truly became a servant of others by reducing their debts and thus, even though he was slated for getting fired, things turned out OK for him. This interpretation suggests that if we amend our sinful ways, things will turn out OK. Again, we thought this downplayed the offensive nature of the parable to which Jesus points.*
5. *We could become a de facto higher critic and simply declare that Jesus did not say this. Of course we would not do that, but don’t we do that in actuality when we never preach on the hard texts? We make Jesus into the sort of Jesus who says things I like to hear and redact from the body of the NT the passages which give us a hard time.*

We did come up with some possible interpretations of the parable which we thought had some merit; although, it must be said that all interpretations of this parable have detractors.

1. *Priorities – this is a first commandment sort of text. The problem with money is not money itself, but the unrighteous wealth, the money which controls us. Our attitudes turn money into either a bane or a blessing.*
2. *This then led to a second and related reading about what is righteous wealth, the sort of wealth with which we are faithful in little things and which reaps heavenly rewards. We thought that righteous wealth was actually treasure received from Christ, spent in Christ’s service, and which reflects the very love of God in my life, not my grasping desire. The actual money itself is neutral but the spender is never neutral. It is either an act of worship or of self-worship/idolatry. Righteous wealth is spent as a gift from God, unrighteous wealth is only begrudgingly released when I get something in return, preferably something I think is more valuable and therefore a cheat against the other person.*
3. *Jesus seems to be speaking of an attitude toward money which runs counter to the attitudes of the world. The world says get more, but Jesus says give it away. Is this a parable and interpretation on Jesus part which is really an exhortation to counter-*

cultural generosity? This is related to #1 and #2, but might be a more specific way to see this. The Christian is simply a generous person.

- 4. We also thought money could be a stand in for life here. We often ask how someone makes a living when we are talking just about the money they make. Even in Jesus day this connection between income and living was made. When the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance in the prior chapter he asks for his share of his fathers “bios” or life.*
- 5. We also thought that we might spiritualize the treasure but noted some problems with this. If the treasure which is un-righteously ours is “forgiveness” or “love” (and this does have the benefit of tying this chapter to the one which precedes it) then the behavior of the unjust steward becomes interesting, but on some level even harder to explain. Capon also likes this idea and suggests that the act of loving and forgiving someone might well be seen as “cheating” God of his due. But the master does still get something here, this seems a stretch. Why would Jesus call this unrighteous wealth? Is it because we get it undeservedly?*

This seems to come in the whole context of the radical work of Christ. In the last chapter, (chapter 15), Jesus has addressed the scandalous nature of the Gospel. The love of God is even shown to the losers. Does Jesus willingly take up a scandalous image to convey the nature of his kingdom? This is good because honesty will always put me there. Is it possible that this text is much simpler than we have made it out to be? Is this simply a picture of God showing mercy to a really lousy human being? Is the point not the manager so much as the master’s treatment of the manager? He thought he was buying something, but the master shakes his head and loves him despite his dishonesty and his foolish attempts to do something about it. What does one do with the commendation Jesus seems to give this guy at the end? I am not sure about this. It sounds like the master is commending dishonest, self-serving behavior.

I was told by a former missionary some time ago that an African culture and indeed most tribal societies would not blink an eye at this text. One was considered not merely acceptable but even virtuous in cheating someone outside the “tribe,” in this case the master, in order to protect your own family. Another missionary said he saw it all the time in Africa, that people would cheat their employer to serve their own family and people considered it simply being a faithful son of the family. In this view, the dishonest steward was actually embodying a sort of tribal virtue which he had compromised by working for the master, but now, with his job in peril, he returned to that virtue by taking care of the members of his tribe. The master then recognized and in turn honored his “virtuous” behavior. I must tell you that I am not sure how that would work in this text and I am also not able to verify very well that this is how a tribal society would see it. Can anyone give me insight into this?

I was told as well that the parable of the prodigal is really interesting when you run it through a cultural lens. If you ask an African why the prodigal was starving, he will answer: “because no

one helped him.” If you ask a Russian he will say, “because there was a famine.” (Remember Russia’s brutal history with famine.) If you ask an American why the man was starving, the usual response is, “he wasted all his money.” What we read in these parables is very culturally conditioned. I am not sure that we can use the African lens without having Jesus looking like he is condoning behavior which our culture considers criminal. But what will we do with this? I am not sure. For me the most palatable solution is to think of this as a disturbing but perceptive insight into just what we do in forgiveness. We are giving away the master’s treasure – namely his favor and love, to those who are indebted to the master, but we are forgiving the debt.

The discussions from several weeks ago of giving up all, even family and life itself as we take up a cross seem to be resonating with the last part of this text.

The next story, which we get next week, is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Its clear message of trusting in God needs to be read here too. Luke is too careful of an author simply to throw those things together randomly. How does this parable lead the hearer to that parable’s clearer message?

Is all this really just about the role that money has in our life? Are we making this just too hard in another way? Is the unjust steward just a jerk and does the world commend him because he is a jerk and is Jesus just telling us that the world commends the jerks and God commends the faithful. It seems a little simplistic, but it might fit some of the text for us rather well.

We are going to have to settle some of this before we can really write a sermon. I look forward to hearing what you have to say Tuesday. This is not an easy text. Amos seems to cast us into a certain way of reading it, a reading which seems to skip the parable. I wonder if the editors of the pericope have any idea what the whole thing is about or is Amos just another wild stab in the dark?

Law

1. Money can be our God – that’s bad, not only is it idolatry but money makes a really lousy god too. When you need it most, it has no help to give. It does not prevent us from dying, it cannot buy happiness, it is a terrible task master, always demanding “more.” Money demands that the scales always balance. If they don’t we have trouble.
2. Congregations are capable of falling into this too. Do our councils meetings focus on the treasurer’s report or the evangelism report? What makes our decisions for us?
3. We cannot serve, at least not in a true sense, both God and money. We have to make a choice. Bi-theism is not a possible alternative. We will either hate one or the other and the other one will get our love, our true love.

4. This is unfortunately contrary to our experience. God sees the truth, but we have a much harder time of it. Money's allure is pretty potent. As a result we often exalt it, despite the fact we know its faults that that God wants otherwise.
5. The world is shrewd about money and we are not. Christians can be really dumb about money.
6. Can we really own money? When we think we have possessions we are actually possessed by them. That money hole that we must feed owns us, we don't own it. Money and the pursuit of money can take control of our lives and wreak havoc with it. Even wealthy people are never sated, at least many of them are not.
7. The world says that money can do no real good except for yourself – climb the food chain. Only a fool would try to do good for someone else with their cash, their time or anything else. Madison Avenue is built on the idea that we spend money for ourselves.

Gospel

1. The Lord God is a much better God than money. There are heavenly dwellings to talk about here that money simply cannot buy. He does not fail me on the day of my death. The heavenly business model is completely antithetical to the worldly, monetary model – it is a model predicated upon grace, a stupid way to do business, but a great way to save the world.
2. God empowers through the Gospel true worship and service of Him. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, he came to serve the least and the little. Now we may serve the greatest and least at the same time, even with our money. We serve God when we serve others. (This is the imagination piece – we can see in Christ a better world than the one than we live in.) The widow, the poor, the orphan, the poor guy who needs a little help, these are not only services rendered to fellow human beings, but they are also services rendered to God. (The cup of cold water given to a little one in Jesus name...)
3. God opens our eyes to see the blessings here. You and I have each seen the truth of “more blessed to give than to receive” which runs directly contrary to the marketing of Madison avenue but which still drives much of the Christmas season which is about to begin. (I think I saw tinsel peeking out from behind the Halloween candy in Wal-Mart the other day already!)
4. There is a blessing about being dumb in regard to money. You might not always have so much but God is a great source for the stuff. He has a way of making it show up when you need it most.
5. That God offers us a liberation from the world's bondage to affluenza. We can actually live differently with the cash, resources, and other blessings. This is a good way to live. There is a real joy in tithing or giving.

Sermon Ideas

1. The Church at Prayer (first half of the Epistle Reading – that the hearer would offer up the prayers, supplications, thanksgivings, and more that are the mark of a faithful life.)

We thought that a preacher who was unable to deal with the second half of the Epistle might reserve that for a Bible study and not read it. If you are not going to preach and deal with this sort of contentious material, we might not read it. Did that make us a little uncomfortable? Yes, but it might be the better part of pastoral discretion as well.

This sermon would cast the vision for the Church that Paul sees in this first paragraph of the Epistle reading. The world has lots of competing visions for the church right now, but Paul speaks of a body of people who are attentively listening and speaking to God. Every part of their lives are brought into this relationship with God. It is the sort of sermon which seeks to capture the whole human life and place it under the Gospel.

Prayer involves praying for folks we don't like as well. We are called to pray for politicians, for those in power and those who make the laws we don't like as well. We pray for the policeman who gave us a ticket last week. But finally this all has a missional point. God wants all people to be saved, even our neighbor whom we don't like. Praying for him will make talking to him easier. Start there.

God has in mind to use us and our lives to be a means to reach that stinker. It won't always be easy, but God really does want all people, even him, to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. He has put us into this time and place to be a witness of His divine love to that person. Pray for him.

2. Priorities (That the hearer would fear, love, and trust in God above all things.)

As the goal for this sermon suggests, this is a sermon about the first commandment, which I think is the real point of the second part of this Gospel text. The preacher may want to be brutally honest about this. He is preaching on the last lines of the text and admitting that he doesn't actually understand what Jesus is doing with the parable. We are going to straight to the punch line and skipping the lead-up to this.

Here is the thing most Lutherans don't get. Having correct doctrine and proper understanding doesn't automatically result in any real fruit. This sermon runs the risk of a congregation nodding their assent and walking out the door to lives which are functionally idolatrous. We don't actually get people to do this by telling them to do this. That is a little like going out and telling your grass get greener in your lawn. It doesn't work. You get greener grass with water and fertilizer, the things that make your lawn healthy. So too, we don't see this sort of fear, love, and trust of God because we exhort them to fear, love, and trust above all things. Haranguing them into the love of God just

doesn't work. We see this fear, love, and trust because we proclaim to them a God who lays claim to that priority of position in our lives by what he has done. We proclaim the God who occupies that place by virtue of the salvation he has wrought. We see this sort of fear, love and trust because in that proclamation the Holy Spirit establishes and feeds that relationship.

We are very used to talking about making God a priority, but in this sermon we want to flip that on its head. We want to notice what our priorities are, but also notice that God is the one who makes himself our priority. Otherwise this is just a harangue on priorities. If God is the "doer" here, it becomes a gospel sermon. If we are the ones who must properly arrange our lives, then this is a law sermon.

So, we don't proclaim that God should be #1, we proclaim he is #1 because he has created us, he has more wonderfully redeemed us, and he has gifted us with Spirit and eternal life. We are not trying to convince them that they should let God be first in their life, as if they were in a position to grant that, we are proclaiming that he is #1! This is not the sort of sermon which seeks to argue someone into changing their mind, it is proclaiming truth so that the Spirit may open their minds and hearts and whole lives to his gracious reign. God makes himself #1 in my life by being good to me.

There was an article in the paper some years ago about a guy who was helped by some Portland residents after Katrina destroyed his New Orleans home. Five years later he is reestablished, back in New Orleans, has a job, and is doing well. But there has been a change, now he roots for the Blazers. He loves Portland. Why? Because they were good to him.

God has been really, really good to us!

Jesus himself asserts that God's gracious kingdom extends into every part their lives, even as far as their wallet. Jesus' death and resurrection have not purchased a part of life, not even a majority of life, but all of life. There are not two masters, only one. God is a jealous God, he shares his rightful title with no other.

But he is also a loving God. He rejoices in the things that are good for you and would that the gifts he bestows give you true Joy because you receive them from him. He is the source of all good things, and evil is only really evil because it lacks him. Even money, he carefully says, is not the problem, but it is the love of money which stands at the root of so many evil things.

This life we describe in which God holds his rightful place is not only a fearful place. It is that, but it does not end there. it is a place in which we experience real joy and peace as God's rightful and gracious rule in our lives produces both love and trust. It is not without purpose that God bids us call him "father." He would hear our prayers as a dear father hears dear children, he would watch over our every moment of every day. This life

knows the peace of a child sleeping in its parent's arms, this life blithely plays under the watchful eye of a careful and omnipotent parent.

3. God's Strange Way (That the hearer would rejoice with God in the forgiveness of scoundrels and other strange, otherworldly ways of the Kingdom of God)

This sermon looks to the parable and tries to make some sense of this for folks, but not too much. God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (see Is 55:10-11). We should expect to be befuddled when we talk to God. We might tie this into the sermon from last week. The Pharisees were utterly perplexed by Jesus' behavior toward the sinners who were sitting at his feet. He actually ate with them – they broke the rules, they should have been punished, but he loved them. What is he thinking? From the Pharisees's perspective, Jesus was out of his mind. Law development in this sermon might start with the notion that we have so tamed Jesus that he does not shock us anymore.

A homeless guy in Boston recently returned thousands of dollars he found. Or there was a little boy who showed up at a local police department and donated \$10.03 to “do something good with it.” His name was Max, you could probably find it on a Google search.

The parable paints a picture which sounds strange to our ears. A man's business manager seems to be cheating him. He is supposed to settle some accounts and he ends up forgiving debt that doesn't belong to him. All this he does for what seems like a terribly selfish reason. And the master commends him and Jesus suggests that somehow we are to emulate this fellow?????

Did Jesus miss something here? Did he not notice that this guy was dishonest? What is going on with this? Is he actually commending to us the behavior of a scoundrel? You can go to prison for doing this sort of thing. Is the kingdom of heaven really like this? If it is do I want to be part of it? After all, if you take the one righteous guy who ever lived, cruelly and unjustly nail him to a cross and somehow this is supposed to make everything better. Is this really how the kingdom of God works?

Yes, and yes, and yes! God's kingdom does not operate by our rules, at times it may even seem perversely to violate those rules. It is true. After all, this is really what Job learned in the Old Testament book which bears his name. God sometimes does things for reasons which seem to us like he had a parlor bet going with Satan. We expect God to be fair, but do we really want him to be? We expect God to play by a set of rules which we understand, but can we really understand his love and mercy and grace?

God's way of saving this world involves the tortuous, sacrificial death of his only begotten Son. I suppose we can see that with some sort of an economic metaphor and say

that such a death is worth the sins of the world and balance our scales that way, but really, does this make sense? God gives himself a gift and calls it even? God's creation rebels against his righteous rule and he doesn't squash it like the deformed slug it has become but instead he joins it, enters it, suffers its worst and dies its death. And that somehow is its salvation, restoration, and redemption. You cannot explain this. Perhaps you can describe parts of it, but for the most part you simply have to believe it.

Don't try to understand all this, don't tell me we have made sense of it. We could ponder this for a thousand years and not plumb its depths. We can see but one facet of this gem at a time, and there are a thousand more, some of which are perpendicular to the one I am looking at right now. We will never be able to hold this in our head, and that is a good thing. If I was running this show the dishonest steward would be sitting in the cell with Bernie Madoff and the rest of his ilk. I would have had God put him on the rack. If God worked this way, my sense of justice would be satisfied, but my future would be fried.

4. This is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Savior. (OT and Epistle: The Holy Spirit will incorporate the hearer's whole life into a grateful response to God's gracious love.)

This sermon is going to take head on some tough issues, especially as it comes to the epistle lesson. But not talking about them only gives room for the troubling aspects of these texts to fester and create many more and deeper problems. Yes, this is not simple nor easy, but it can be done and the preacher who never undertakes this will find that it gets done for him and he rarely will like the way that turns out.

Amos gives us something of an entrance into these difficult issues. God cares about the way the little guy gets treated. This extends even to the purchasing decisions which we make in the shoe store and the decisions we make in our business dealings. He sees them all, he is in a position to judge them all, and he cares for the little guy. This is not a matter of indifference to him. Amos is warning us.

But this is really preparing us for another issue which will rear its head in the Epistle.

There Paul will enjoin Timothy and his congregation to a godly worship. This involves prayer, something which we can hardly disagree with. After all for a Christian to be against prayer is like an American who is anti-apple pie, motherhood, and unrestrained capitalism. (oops, that OT text might get in the way of that last bit.)

But then he brings up the question of women in the Church. This pleases God? That women are silent? That they are restricted in their dress? That she is submissive? This sounds like something the Taliban would say? How does that jibe with women who are heads of state, legislators, and governors? (Listing Lutheran politicians is always somewhat dangerous. Jan Brewer, the controversial governor of Arizona, is an LCMS

member, I think, but so was Jesse “the Body” Ventura who was governor of Minnesota for a while after his pro wrestling career came to an end.)

What about this pleases God? First of all, you will want to know what you are talking about here. The NT witness on women and their role is hardly uniform. Jesus apparently had women disciples which was a radical move on his part. No one else would have done that. The early Church apparently had deaconesses as an office in the Church. Paul sent one of them, Phoebe, to the people of Rome to read his letter, presumably in a worshipping assembly. This sort of reading of a letter in the ancient world was often as much an act of interpretation as it was simply reading something. She would have offered up authoritative answers. What is more, when Paul needed to correct Apollos’ errant theology he turned to Prisca and her husband Aquila to do this. It is noteworthy that her name always shows up first when they are mentioned, unheard of in the ancient world. This is hardly an argument that women cannot lead or that they have to remain silent at all times.

So what are we to do with this message that says this is pleasing to God? The Ephesian context might help us. The cult of Artemis was led by a woman and involved a great deal of ecstatic worship of a sexual nature. Was Paul simply trying to say, “not like those guys!”? Perhaps. Was he trying to reflect some ancient social expectations, perhaps, but he was also willing to break those conventions.

What I think the preacher wants to say is that this is not nearly as cut and dried as it has often been made out to be. There is room for God’s people to talk about this and disagree. This is the message I would hope that your women who may be upset about this would take away from this sermon. What sounds like a final word here in Timothy may not be so final or so oppressive.

The preacher, however, will ultimately want to point the whole assembly to the final goal of this. God who cares about the little people in Amos, cares about the women in Timothy, even the kings and people in authority too. He wants all people to be saved. This is what pleases him. He is rather unambiguous about that. The arguments and the confusion about strategy are all to be expected when humans are involved. But he has been clear in more than one place – he loves to save people. Last week’s Gospel lesson said it well – the shepherd and the woman rejoice to find/save the lost. (John 3:16, Ez. 33:10-11, Acts 11:13-14, etc.)