

Sermon WOW
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Olivet Congregational Church
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SCRIPTURE

Amos 8: 4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

1 Timothy 2: 1-7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Luke 16: 1-15

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s

debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And 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. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'

Sermon WOW

WOW. WOW is what comes to mind when I think of my Old Testament class at Hartford Seminary. WOW. It's a catchy word. It suggests amazement or astonishment. Well, I don't know if I can say I was amazed or astonished when my professor taught us about WOW and its place in the history of the Jewish people and its relevance today. But WOW is probably what comes to mind first when I think of that class. You see, that professor taught us that WOW was his anachronym for Wine, Oil (olive oil) and Wheat.

Dr. Kim used WOW to explain the economics of the Jewish people; the economic system of the farmers and the land owners over the centuries. You see, the farmers lived in the north in Galilee and produced wine, olive oil, and wheat. But they did not own the land on which they grew their crops. The owners of the land, referred to as the masters, lived in the south. But the land owners had managers who would collect the "rent" in the form of crops from the farmers. Now the problem was that as the land owners needed more and more wealth to

purchase things such as ivory, silver, furniture, clothing, sandals, or other expensive items, they would raise the rent or charge greater and greater interest. So farmers needed to produce more and more crops for the land owners, just to stay on the land. The farmers were constantly struggling to pay their rents and at risk of losing their homes or going to prison. It was a case of the rich getting richer off the work of the laborers and the poor getting poorer. It made for an interesting discussion in class. After all, who knew that such things could happen?

Well, God knew this. And the prophets knew this. We hear it in our reading from Amos as he speaks of those in power “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The prophets let the people know that God was not pleased with this abuse of the poor; gaining wealth at the expense of the poor. The prophets spoke truth, God’s truth, to power.

Wow.

Jesus knew this. It happened in his day too. And he addressed it in this parable. Now, it’s important to remember that this parable follows the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Last week we heard about the lost sheep and coin, and how God seeks the lost and rejoices. Jesus told his parable in front of an audience of tax collectors and sinners, who were thought to be lost, and Pharisees, who were individuals with authority and power. Pharisees knew about wealth, persons with wealth, and God’s disdain for abusing wealth and people.

While this parable can be confusing and difficult, I think that if we put it in this context, it’s a bit easier to understand.

The landowner, whom Jesus identifies as the master, is annoyed that his manager has not brought in enough money. So he is going to fire that manager. We don’t know how old that manager is, but we do know that he doesn’t think he’s strong enough to dig. So he might be middle aged, which some of us could identify with. And he is about to lose his job. Now, he really does not want to beg. So, I think we might understand his motives for finding a way out of this situation.

The manager goes to the farmers that owe the master money. Now as a reminder, the Torah had a few things to say about lending money and charging interest, especially to the poor. In Exodus it says, “If you lend money to my

people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.” (Exodus 22.25) In Leviticus it says, “Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you.” (Leviticus 25.36) And in Deuteronomy it says “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent.” (Deuteronomy 23.19)

So when this manager approached the farmers and asked them what they owed, and had them pay less than they owed, he could have been negating the interest they were being charged or foregoing his share of the profits. The manager was shrewd in taking care of himself but also provided relief for the struggling farmers. You might say he was able to fall back on the tenants of their faith.

Jesus offers his explanation of the parable, and more. I would like to share **The Message** version of his remarks.

⁸⁻⁹ “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

God Sees Behind Appearances

¹⁰⁻¹³ Jesus went on to make these comments:

If you’re honest in small things,
 you’ll be honest in big things;
If you’re a crook in small things,
 you’ll be a crook in big things.
If you’re not honest in small jobs,
 who will put you in charge of the store?
No worker can serve two bosses:
 He’ll either hate the first and love the second
Or adore the first and despise the second.
 You can’t serve both God and the Bank.

¹⁴⁻¹⁸ When the Pharisees, a money-obsessed bunch, heard him say these things, they rolled their eyes, dismissing him as hopelessly out of touch. So Jesus spoke to them: “You are masters at making yourselves look good in front of others, but God knows what’s behind the appearance.” (**The Message** - Luke 16: 8-15)

So, if we are to learn from the shrewd manager, we can consider that his actions, brought on by his own adversity were smart but also benefited others. We can also be smart for “what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live...” We can look at how we can make choices that may benefit us but also benefit others.

Maybe we are also called to be “hopelessly out of touch” or to be aware but to act in ways that may be considered “out of touch” with society. As followers of Jesus, we should be aware of society’s emphasis on obtaining more and more and prizing possessions over relationships. We can make people and relationships our priorities.

In Paul’s letter to Timothy he urges early Christians to pray, not just as individuals, but as a community using various forms of prayer – supplications, intercessory prayer and prayers of thanks. He urges them to pray for those in authority and in power, be it government or financial power, “for kings and all who are in high positions, so that **we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.**” Living in peace and dignity. We cannot have peace if we don’t all have dignity.

God desires that all people are able to live in peace with dignity. Paul confirms this saying that it is “right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires **everyone** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”... and that Jesus “gave himself **a ransom for all.**” Paul even reminds us that he is an apostle who is sharing the message of Jesus to Gentiles – to those who had been considered religious outsiders. God desires that **Everyone** be saved, that **All people** receive God’s truth of love, and that Jesus gave himself for **All people**. God is the God of **All people**.

Where does that leave us?

The struggles of the rich and the poor are not confined to ancient times. We have seen that again and again throughout history. The struggles were with societies then and are with society now.

The shrewd manager was aware of the system but found a way to “manipulate or work the system.” While he achieved what he needed for himself to survive, he was also able to serve others who are struggling under an oppressive system- who were also at risk of losing everything. He worked the system for dignity for all.

We are called to hear Paul’s word to pray for those in power, not that good or bad may come to them but that they might work for the dignity of all people – not just those who are financially secure – and to work for peace. As individuals and as a church, we are called to challenge those who do not support the dignity of all people, especially those in positions of authority, and to use our power with that in mind.

We are called to hope and offer hope for becoming a community where all belong. If we look to the SNEUCC website, we are called to “Make God’s Love and Justice Real,” to “Make Disciples of Jesus,” “Make New Life as Agents of Change,” and to “Form Covenant Partnerships.” We are called to work together with others for the common good, creating a better world as followers of Jesus by making God’s justice a reality by sharing God’s love.

Jesus tells us that we “cannot serve two masters; You cannot serve God and wealth.” Let us choose God. Can you imagine our world if everyone did that? What an amazing world that would be! Wow!