

"Lives That are Congruent"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 25 10:45 a.m. Sunday, September 19, 2010
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Amos 8:4-7; I Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On several occasions over the last 23 years of being a pastor, I've been in places where someone—whom I may or may not know—sees me and sees my collar, and says something like this: "Well, heh, heh, heh, I guess I'll just have to watch my language with a pastor present. Heh, heh, heh." I smile and chuckle with them as if it's a brand new joke I never heard before.

What troubles me is that their only motivation not to say offensive words is that a pastor is in the same room. Apparently, if I wasn't around, they would feel just fine saying expletives. Apparently, if I **was** around but not wearing my collar, not known as a pastor, they would **also** feel just fine saying expletives.

I tell you this story that's happened frequently enough for me to notice because it speaks to our inability to lead lives that are congruent with our faith. What I mean is that Christians find it difficult to be Christian in all places. We may be inspired to be faithful and Christ-like in worship or in Sunday School or at the church picnic, but are less likely to be faithful and Christ-like at work, at school, on the highway, on the athletic field, in our neighborhoods, at home. The circle that represents who we are here at Trinity is often not the same as the circle that represents all the other parts of our lives. They are not congruent.

It's not just whether we use offensive language at the office or in our home, but not here. It encompasses the way we respond to just about anything outside the holy, rarefied atmosphere of "church." When we're done dealing with things about "church," well, we can get on with life, turn to those other things that interest us that seem to have no connection to "church." And I'm not leaving out pastors, either. When I'm done dealing with things about "church," and take my collar off for the day, what kind of person am I, and are my actions from that moment on congruent with my faith?

The trick is how one lives each and every day so that they are leading lives that are congruent with their being a beloved child of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Not a simple feat. Which is what the prophet Amos points out in our first lesson. Amos rails against the corrupt, unethical business practices running rampant in Israel in his day. These unjust economic practices sucked the poor dry, kept the poor right where they were—at the bottom rung of society and beholden to the very wealthy and very powerful for the mere pittance they received.

But the unethical business practices weren't practiced 24/7. Not on the Sabbath, at least. No, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday when all people were to rest from their labors and work was not permitted, and one was to go to worship, as well as during specific religious festivals when one was expected to display a certain amount of decorum—well, at those times shady business practices didn't happen. On the Sabbath there would be no false weights and balances, no selling things to the poor at exorbitant prices, no offering shoddy merchandise or inferior foods, no shaking down those who owed money. Of course, I wouldn't say it offered the poor any respite. They couldn't enjoy any **ethical** business practices because they couldn't go to market on the Sabbath—the market was closed.

And if money was the bottom line, those businesspersons who were putting their thumb on the scale when no one was looking, who were charging far above the actual price for food, knew they were making no money on the Sabbath. They might even have thought they were losing money because they couldn't do business at all. So, says Amos, dripping with sarcasm, these people can't wait till the Sabbath is done, worship over, the festival finished, so they can get on with life, return to the things that interest them which they believe have no connection with their faith so recently on display in the synagogue. Amos writes their imaginary dialogue: *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 (an ephah is a dry measure, about 2/3 of a bushel) 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.*

Then Amos speaks for the Lord in words most chilling: *Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.* The Lord God looked at the people of Israel whom he had created and blessed, and saw them living lives that were not congruent with the holy life he envisioned and into which he had called them.

Of course, maybe the Church has done a disservice here, and has only added to our incongruent lives by not talking about the things that interest us out there beyond "church." If the Church has nothing to say about things in our daily lives—where we spend our time, how we spend our money, what things we value, the ways we interact—if the Church has nothing to say about those things out there, well, no wonder our life out there is not congruent with our life in here.

Take money, for instance. Oh, the Church talks about money, but often in relation to our offerings and the church budget. The other times the Church talks about money, money is given a negative connotation, such as in our first lesson today. But what if the Church talked about money in a new way, understanding the good it can do, and helped people think about wise choices they could make on a daily basis with their money because of their devotion to God, because of their faith? Well, wouldn't that be a novel approach?

Maybe that's what's happening in undoubtedly the strangest parable Jesus ever told—often called the parable of the dishonest manager. Now, you need to know there are approximately 973 different interpretations of this story that is our Gospel

lesson today. Well, maybe not 973, but a number of different interpretations. Mostly because it is a strange, confusing story. A mid-level manager is discovered by his boss to be, frankly, a fairly lousy manager. The business is losing money because of him, and he's about to be fired. Before that happens, though, the dishonest manager makes some deals with people who are in debt to his boss. Essentially, the manager reduces their debt in order to have them pay back the debt sooner, like now. Hard to tell if his boss loses money on these deals, but interestingly enough, the manager himself might have foregone his own commission here in the reduction of the debt he offers—it may be the manager doesn't make money either. But he does this so those folks might just remember him in a few weeks when he comes to them looking for a job. Now, I'm not saying this is exemplary behavior, but Jesus does say in v. 8 that the boss commended the dishonest manager *because he had acted shrewdly*. Then Jesus goes on: *The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light*. In other words, people of faith sometimes don't have the savvy that other people have—People of faith sometimes foolishly believe that following Christ means we don't ever have to engage the things of this world. But Jesus seems to be saying we should have a wisdom like that manager who knows how to deal with things of this world, and such a wisdom may help us keep the things of this world in proper perspective. Now, it could still appear that Jesus is telling us to be unethical, like this dishonest manager, when we are dealing with money. But, I don't think that's where Jesus is going with this. For note the end of our lesson where Jesus says: *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.*

Jesus, in this strange parable, is giving us a healthy, proper perspective on money. And he's telling us to be shrewd as we deal with it. For he's telling us not to let money rule us, so that our lives and our energy and our time are consumed by our devotion to it. Amos was describing people who **were** slaves to their money—it became their god, and drove them to engage in terrible, deceitful business practices. But Jesus reminds us we can serve only one master, we can be devoted only to One. That One is God, and when we serve only that master, money is put back in its proper perspective. Then you and I, as we grow together in Christ and seek to live lives congruent with our faith, can actually talk about money in the Church—how it can be ethically earned and used, for what things we might save, where all it can be shared, and how wise investing and well-executed commerce can benefit many. Jesus is suggesting that money, in proper perspective, is intended to serve God and God's good purposes for us and for all creation. **AMEN.**