

**Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 23
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 / Psalm 90:12-17 / Hebrews 4:12-16 / Mark 10:17-31**

**October 4th, 2009
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Threats, Gratitude, and Generosity

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

So you all are going to pledge, right? . . .

After readings like these - terrifying as they are in some ways - I wonder why more of us don't make a mad dash for the door instead. Take this grumpy reading from Amos, a grumpy prophet's prophet, who was declaiming his hard-hitting, threatening words at the peak of the ancient Israelites' military and economic might, a time of prosperity and abundance. Amos, you can well imagine, redefines the Hebrew version of the "voice crying in the wilderness" - a gloomy Eeyore for the Davidic dynasty happily living it up.

Then there are these words from The Letter to the Hebrews declaring God's word sharper than a sword, separating soul from spirit, joints from marrow and all that. That's hair-raising enough on its own.

But then there's the profoundly enigmatic, if not vexing gospel passage for today, a teaching so radical in its call to holy poverty that it can even make those of us living paycheck to paycheck wonder if what we give is enough.

Our scripture readings this day taken together remind me of a scene from the pop romantic comedy, *Two Week's Notice*, which makes its way into our DVD player on occasion. Hugh Grant stars as the New York City developer, George Wade. Sandra Bullock stars opposite him as George's reluctant attorney, Lucy Kelson, who sports a significantly bigger social conscience than her billionaire boss. In the not so brilliantly written but sometimes hysterically funny and sardonic plot, there comes a point when George meets Lucy's mother, a radical liberal's liberal - think very much in the 1960's sense - and she makes it clear to George that he is far from her favor with all of his affluence, capitalist ambitions, and tycoon credentials. Later, George muses about Lucy's mother, "She's terrifying... I thought she was going to kill me and feed me to the poor."

Our scriptures feel a little bit like that today, don't they?

Especially today's gospel, with Jesus teaching this rich young man about his need for radical poverty. And Jesus' disciples are none the wiser. They, like us, live in a world where material abundance is perceived as a measure of God's favor. Granted most of us don't talk about it in divine terms these days, but many of our celebrities are just that because their affluence speaks to secular society about them somehow being more favored than the teeming masses; a cut above the rest of us. And how we delight in their falls from grace!

It's hard for us not to imagine as the disciples must have done that the Kingdom of God meant streets paved with gold and overflowing abundance - perhaps even economic, if not military might for all the righteous.

Didn't the wealthy, like the young man in the gospel, so faithful to his spiritual tradition, have the Kingdom already with his material security - a clear reward for his fidelity? So how was it hard for him to enter the Kingdom when he was at least all but there? And where did that leave the masses in their grinding poverty - which so clearly demonstrated that they were somehow out of divine favor? Who then can be saved?

But for all of us who live in the materially abundant West – where all of us, even the least among us, have more resources than the vast majority of human beings – we know that we are no closer to God's reign simply by virtue of our wealth than the poorest of the poor. In truth, many of us wrestle with the teachings of our tradition: the promised divine favor for the least of these, the nameless at the gate, the destitute. Somewhere we can harbor in our hearts that awful fear that at some point, someone like Amos or Lucy's mother might come along in the name of God and threaten to kill us, and feed us to the poor.

But we forget so easily that astonishing verse right in the heart of today's gospel story – that in language clearer than almost anywhere else in scripture – God in Christ gazes at this rich young man. . . and loves him; just as God in Christ gazes at us, right through us, and into our hearts. . . and loves us. . . radically, unrelentingly, unequivocally, knowing everything – even more than we know about ourselves. The first are last and the last are first. A love impossible for us is possible for God.

This time of year, we are asked, as we are able, to break open our wallets, accounts, and abundance for the needs of this and the greater community, for the pressing needs among us and beyond these walls, and for those who attend to them; and we wrestle with a sense of obligation to give out of our material wealth. Just as the rich young man must have wrestled with what he saw as an obligation Jesus setting before him: an obligation to sell what he had and give the proceeds, along with his righteous sense of entitlement, to those who appeared to be the least of his neighbors. For Jesus wants him and us to be free from that awful clamor that our material abundance brings to our lives. To remember that it really doesn't belong to us after all. . . and so – here's the Good News of God's loving Word that divides us from our "stuff" like cutting joints from marrow – we do not belong to our material wealth. God loves us too much to leave us in that kind of bondage. We are not owners. God is the owner of all. We are only stewards.

The teaching for the disciples, for the rich young man, and for us so many generations later, is that God's grace, and indeed the kingdom of heaven, is not measured by our material abundance. The grace of God in our lives is instead measured by our generosity: a generosity measured not in the price of gold or the value of portfolios or property, but in bread broken like hearts broken open; in a cup overflowing with the generosity and love that God has for us. And when we truly to start not only believing, but living that faith, we cannot help but become generous stewards of what we have received.

So be generous this season, my sisters and brothers, not out of fear, but out of gratitude for God's love for you. And see how that opens the door to God's reign in your lives.