

“Versions of Reality”
Twenty Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 18, 2016
Amos 8:4-7 Luke 16:1-13
First Presbyterian Church of Sandpoint, Idaho
Pastor Andy Kennaly

I saw a devotional that had an image of the tip of a pencil just finishing writing out this phrase, “God gives us people to love and things to use, not things to love and people to use.” (read twice)

http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29). Our society, based on capitalism and a corporation-based growth economy seems to have forgotten this foundation of creation, that we are made for relationship. Greed, materialism, broken relationship, and polarization are things we deal with in large and small ways everyday in America. The prophet, Amos would feel quite at home in our society as he confronts people who would rather neglect the Sabbath commandment in order to make more money, even at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. This prophet was catching people in the act of cheating others, and he was calling them to examine their lives in light of God’s true intentions and purposes of loving relationship and justice.

The deceitful people Amos is dealing with say, “We will make the ephah (ee – phaw) 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.” Wow! Deceitful people are selling a defective product and overcharging people for that product, especially people who can’t afford it to begin with; Amos is calling for economic justice! Making the ephah small and the shekel great is an interesting phrase. An ephah has to do with measuring. If you look up that word online you’ll see one definition which says it’s an “ancient Hebrew unit of dry measure, equal to a tenth of a homer or about one bushel (35 liters). Another definition is identical except instead of 35 liters it says 33 liters. Even in our own modern language, you see what people had to deal with in ancient Israel. There was no standardization. One town said a shekel was based on a certain measurement, while another town said one shekel was based on another certain measurement, but they were slightly different, either more or less than the other town. People in business would travel from town to town to sell things and they would need multiple sets of measurements so that the value of what they sold was accurate for a specific place. But it was very tempting and common to “practice deceit with false balances.” They would use the measurement of one town to cheat people in the next town. To the people, it looked like they were getting what they paid for, but it really wasn’t the full amount.

Kind of like in our world, every gas pump, for example, has a sticker on it that says that pump has been certified according to a standard weights and measures test. But it does happen, especially in inner cities, that instead of the full gallon that the pump says your buying, you are actually given 7/8 of a gallon, just shy of a full amount. Cheating still happens, especially in areas that are economically vulnerable and people have limited resources with which to defend themselves.

I talked with one guy who shared about how someone new was assigned to their golf group one day and this guy caught this new person in cheating while playing the round of golf. Just a small thing, but cheating nonetheless. So he asked the new person what business they owned, and after finding out, mentioned that he would never buy things from that business ever

again, and he would tell his friends not to shop there because the guy is a cheater. Is it just a game of golf? Or is it more?

“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.” This parable of Jesus sharing about the shrewd manager is a story intended to get us asking questions about what kind of world we want to live in, what kind of world God intends, and how we participate in living a “Thy-Kingdom-come, thy-will-be-done, -on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven” kind of life where heaven and earth agree because there is no separation. In other words, what kind of eternal home do you want to be welcomed to, starting now? One built on deceit, where you’re always looking over your shoulder, or one built honestly which knows that true riches involve relationship first.

Over the years, I’ve preached on this passage several times, only this time I noticed something I hadn’t seen before: it seems that Jesus has a hint of sarcasm as he relates this story. For example, where Jesus summarizes by saying, “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.” Jesus is basically slamming both the manager and the master as being children of the age, not children of light; people who have their values and actions based on loving things, based on using others, based on false priorities rather than God’s good intentions. Right after that, Jesus also says, “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.” This makes sense if Jesus is using a hint of sarcasm because he’s showing how ultimately bankrupt dishonest wealth makes people, and these supposed friends actually have no power to welcome anyone into eternal homes. Indeed, they have rather corrupted people. Jesus is reminding them that there are consequences for your actions, and although you may think you’re autonomous, we are actually all in this together as a community.

What is meant by, “true riches?” What kind of master are you going to be? How do we live in community? What kind of society are we living in? What kind of culture have we inherited? How do we reshape culture, if we’re actually interested in that?

These types of questions are pretty big, so we’re relieved to hear that we can start small, and our small part has implications to the larger systems. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” is another way of saying that because we’re all connected, one with another, individual with community, human being with the earth, specific time with eternity, particular place with all there is seen and unseen; through these connections, our faithful attitudes and actions can make a world of difference, even if they seem small. Even when it seems like we are surrounded and overwhelmed by a world that cheats, has people who deceive, and sometimes we get shorted; we still have faithful opportunities to act with integrity, to choose whom we will serve, and where we will place our focus.

Do you value Christian faith? Do you value Christian community? Do you find value in coming together as a people, a congregation? Do you value First Presbyterian Church as such a gathering? A church is not a place, not a building, but it is a people. Do you value this people and the work God does through this group? One expression of this, if you do value the ministry and mission here, is by giving of your time, talents, and treasures.

We live in a strange time where change happens much faster than other generations had to deal with, and this is true for giving money as well. Every Sunday we pass the plate, the offering plates, down and back around the pews. Cash or check. Do you know my sons have never, ever written a check? Most people their age don’t have checks. If we limit peoples’

giving to the cash in their pocket, then we are limiting people giving. Like most churches, after worship, the Financial Secretary and another volunteer go into the office and count that money, allocating different values to the categories they belong to and tracking who gives what and when. Most congregations in this way allow money to have such control over them, far more than they allow trust or relationship to define them. Most churches don't even let their pastor know how much each member gives. Money creates secrecy. Friends, the Christian church has largely failed when it comes to stewardship, and it's no wonder that Jesus is not telling this story to the Pharisees or the scribes, but he is telling this story to his own disciples, the ones who ought to know better already, but they don't.

In this story the master is just as culpable as the manager because neither one of them really bases their actions on a deep faith and trust in God, or a caring relationship with one another, but rather on worldly values that are culturally defined. Church culture gets shaped in similar ways. So let's ask again, do you value authentic, honest ministry, or not? Enough to trust? Enough to give while you live? Enough to give after you are gone?

A small church in small town Oregon had two older women, widows, each living very simply. As they each eventually died, the church was shocked to find out that both of these women had gifted the church in their wills. Each one had hundreds of thousands of dollars set up to become endowment funds for the congregation, they had worked this out privately with their lawyers. One endowment is now designated to keep the facility maintained in their absence, and one is shaped with the intention of supporting new ministries and mission endeavors. A committee was set up to manage those funds, to receive applications from worthy ideas and projects, choosing every year what to award funds to through thousands of dollars in interest. Two women with simple faith, living simply, by intention, integrity, and a generous spirit, provided ways to give beyond their own lifetimes, to help ministry flourish even through times when the congregation faces challenges in numbers and participation. They helped the church weather the storms, and that church is still going, bearing witness to the gospel in their community.

God is all about loving community, even to the point of economic justice that lifts up the needy and gives hope to those who have lost it or have been cheated through deceit. Jesus preaches about money more than any other subject, so let's trust each other enough to talk seriously about our need to give. Which version of reality do you want to live in, the kind that says, "Give till it hurts," or says, "Give till it feels good,"? God help us to have receptive hearts, living with honest integrity, so we may lovingly share with the community and beyond. May God be glorified, now & forever, Amen.