

Sermon on Mark 10:17-31 and Amos 5-6-7, 10-13
19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today's lessons from Amos and Mark bring up sore points of contention in the Church and in our nation. Most of them deal with money and possessions, as well as justice and equity – two areas of great interest in our lives, that compete for priority and attention! The prophet Amos accused the wealthy people who were in power in Israel in his day of being corrupt and cheating the poor, during a time of great prosperity. For this they were under God's judgment. In Mark's gospel, Jesus was approached by a wealthy young man who wanted to follow him as a disciple. He was a good and faithful person, who had kept all of God's commandments (or so he thought). So Jesus told him that there was one more thing to do: he must sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, then he could come, and follow him. Of course, the young man was shocked (as were the disciples). He thought about it, shook his head, and walked away sadly. He wanted to, but he couldn't do it. So Jesus said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples despaired, and cried out, "Then who can be saved?" (if not the rich, whose righteousness God has blessed with wealth?) Jesus said, "For mortals, it is impossible. But not for God; for God all things are possible."

Friends, this is the bad news, and the good news today! You and I cannot earn our way to God's favor or to heaven; no one, rich or poor, can save themselves. Only God can save us. But God can also do the impossible: God can save the poor and God can save the rich. God can even save us from ourselves!

So what was Amos so angry about when he spoke up in the mid-eighth century B.C., and what does that have to do with us? Isn't this ancient history? Only that the wealthy have been cheating the poor from the dawn of creation, and it still happens today – that's what it has to do with us! Specifically, the prophet Amos spoke up because it seems that the wealthy elite in the northern kingdom of Israel had come upon a great money-making scheme. In those days, land and property was passed down in families from generation to generation by inheritance. There was only so much land, so your present and future well-being depended on receiving inherited land when your parents died. But some of the wealthy elite began buying up some of this land, so that some sons and daughters ended up with nothing when their parents passed on. Some people become very wealthy in land and possessions, and some landless families became very poor. Beyond that, when

farmers brought their produce to town to sell, merchants found a way to cheat them on their price. And some of those in authority took bribes to look the other way.

Amos saw this, and began to speak. He said, "Seek the Lord and live" or face the wrath of God." He warned those who trampled on the poor, who took from them levies of grain (which left the poor hungry), that though they built large homes of stone, they would not live in them, and they would not enjoy the wine of their vineyards, obtained by deceit and fraud. God saw how they trampled on the poor and pushed aside the needy at the gate of Jerusalem, the entrance to the market and the place where justice was supposed to be done. "Seek good and not evil that you may live", Amos cried out. "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate...so that God will be gracious to you." It seems that the wealthy had a problem. Their deceit was known by God, who intended for all people to enjoy the fruits of the promised land, and abhorred this gap between rich and poor.

Well, about 800 years later, some things had not changed. Another prophet rose up in Israel and Judah named Jesus of Nazareth, who taught the people about the kingdom of God and wasn't afraid to name the sins of the wealthy and powerful. One day, as Jesus was on his journey to Jerusalem, a wealthy young man approached him, who wanted to follow him, but first had a question for Jesus. What must he do to inherit eternal life? He had done everything that was required, he thought. He had followed all of God's commandments from his youth, and for this he had been rewarded (he thought) by God with wealth, prosperity, and many privileges. He didn't wonder where his next meal was coming from, or lack a comfortable home - like those poor folk who suffered hungry and homelessness (who must have done so much wrong to be judged so harshly for their sins!). This man was feeling pretty good about himself, and just looked for a word of affirmation from Jesus.

"Well, young man," Jesus said, "you do lack one small thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me." This shocked and grieved the man, who then walked away. This was the one thing he could not do, for he had many possessions. How could he give up the one thing he had learned had the most value to him? Just for God? It wasn't worth it. He was no fool. So he walked away. How sad.

Okay, Christians, brothers and sisters, we all feel sorry for this young man, don't we. Because he missed out on the chance to follow Jesus! Well, guess what. Every one of us would probably have done the same thing! You and I would have walked away. Because we're Americans, and we know the value of our land, our wealth, and our possessions (even if we don't have much of it!). You and I would not give all we have to the poor, just for the chance to follow Jesus. Because Jesus asks the impossible. So don't think you and I are any better than this young man.

The disciples knew it. When they saw this young man walk away, they were in despair. Jesus! How could you say that! He had so much potential! Think of what he could have done for us! He probably knew the right people to keep Jesus safe, and keep a roof over our heads and our bellies full for years! Jesus had just driven off a rich, prospective new member of the church by making impossible demands! But Jesus was only being honest in answering the man's question. And if you and I asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" what do you think Jesus would said to you and me? What is the hardest thing for you or me to give up? That's what Jesus would ask for. In this case, it was money and possessions. What is it for you? What could you never give away, that is what God requires of you in order for you to "earn" eternal life in heaven. And that's the point. There is NOTHING that you and I can do to earn our salvation or life in heaven. This is something only God can give us, for free, out of grace. Get it?

But then, there still remains that nagging question: what do we do about our wealth and possessions? If we keep those, where are we with God? What if we who have something to mistreat or cheat the poor – can we just ignore it? What if we look the other way if some are cheated or are not treated with justice? This is where it gets complicated for us. Does it have any consequence in our lives of faith? Should Christians worry about the poor, when grace is free?

It would be easy to make this a "damn the rich who cheat the poor" sermon. I could go on and on about corporations, wealthy executives, bankers, Halliburton, and people like Denny Hecker who have made fortunes by cheating the poor and anyone else from whom they can scam their wealth. It would be too easy – but it wouldn't help any of us here, because we need to look at ourselves, and see where we fit into all of this. We claim that we are not rich. Okay, so what is it that we have that will indict us in the prosecution brought by Amos and Jesus?

How about this: what is it that you or I accumulate that you think gets you into eternal life – or what do you have that Jesus asks you to give up, which you can't? Is it your home – that you "bought", or inherited from your family – what about those who have no home? Maybe you have acquired a great library of books – but what about those children who cannot read? Maybe you have learned to cook wonderful gourmet meals, or hold to a disciplined diet which keeps you health – but what about those who don't have enough to eat, or have an eating disorder? Many of us have a fulfilling career, or a comfortable retirement – but what about those who can't find employment at all these days? Many of us have enjoyed a fulfilling career in education, medicine, social services, or construction – but what about those who have not had the educational opportunities to have a career, or can't get a contract when the City of St. Paul or the MN Dept. of Transportation has a new building or road construction contract. Some of us have an adequate health insurance plan, or are on Medicare, which is great – but what

about those who have no health insurance? Some of us have the luxury of deciding whether we will volunteer to stay overnight as a host for Project Home this month – and some families have no choice, because their only option for shelter is to sleep in Redeemer’s undercroft tonight with their children. Some of us are white, and some of us are black, but many people – mostly persons of color – have not enjoyed the same privileges or opportunities that you and I take for granted. Is this fair? How has it come to this, in the United States of America?

In closing, what should we do with all these questions? I propose that we start asking them of ourselves, and make this discussion a priority of our conversations and ministry at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer – in addition to answering the question of eternal life! Is there justice in the gates around us in the city of St. Paul? Is anyone cheated by having less opportunities in our community and in our state? Is our Church willing to take the role of prophet, along with people of faith in other congregations, to ask these questions publicly and seek changes in how wealth and power are distributed in our world?

As we consider an “Extreme Makeover of our church” as our mission renewal them in the coming years, I suggest that this goes further than painting and repairing our church building, and it goes beyond even the renewing of our spiritual lives as people of faith. I believe that our mission must include the transformation of our society, to bring racial and economic justice to all people in our community and world, of every race, religion, and nation. I invite you to join me and others from Redeemer in a frank discussion about addressing poverty in the State of Minnesota – with state senator John Marty, following worship, at 11:30 am in the church undercroft. And come to a hearing on Tuesday at 1:00 pm in Room 10 in the State Office Building next to the State Capitol to hear how our State Dept. of Transportation has fallen short for 17 years in its goals to hire persons of color and women in the many road construction projects in our state. There are many ways for us to learn, speak, and act for justice as a Church.

But to put this into perspective, we don’t work for justice to earn our salvation. It’s impossible. But for God, all things are possible! Sometimes I wonder what that rich young man in the gospel did after he thought more about what Jesus said to him. Did he ever reconsider, and come back? You and I have an invitation to follow Jesus, and no matter what we decide to do today, the invitation stands forever. So what will you and I do? Thanks be to God for the invitation to follow, and for the gift of eternal life, through faith in God’s Son.