

“Using Our Blessings”

Sunday October 10, 2021

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Good morning. GOOD MORNING! Some of you know me already and some of you might be seeing me for the first time this morning. I am Intern Pastor Jory and I will be with you for the next two years. New people just meeting me, please do not pay attention to the sad looks of the people who already know me, dreading the next two years!

I hope you will take a moment after the service to say hello. I know we will only be seeing half of each other's faces, but I would love to meet you and begin to know you.

Looking at today's readings I was reminded at how God either has an incredible sense of humor, or has a preference using what we might call, “not the sharpest tools in the shed.” Or maybe God wants to make it absolutely clear, that it is the Holy One doing the work and not the human being.

Just look at Amos. Amos has no qualifications to be a prophet. He is a shepherd. It can be hard for us to imagine what that might mean in our day in age. In ancient Israelite society, Amos would be just about as far down the social scale as you can get. Although the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness with Moses, they were well settled. They had land and cities. They weren't those dusty, nomadic people their ancestors were. They had come up in the world.

I can relate. My great grandmother had to leave school at the age of 12 to support her family. She married at 15 and became a homesteader on Montana's harsh northern prairie. My grandmother tells me they didn't have indoor plumbing. They didn't have electricity until she was in high school. Today, my parents live in a nice home in a nice cul-de-sac in town. The house is painted. The lawn is trimmed. They have all the comforts that technology can give them. No one is headed out into the yard to wash up, or cut the head off of the chicken for dinner. My mother says she is infinitely

grateful, her chicken comes in neat packages from the grocery store without a feather in sight.

My parents, like the Israelites, have come up in the world. The Israelites are not only townies, but real citified people. And Amos is still out there, essentially a migrant worker, tending herds that will end up prepared by servants, seasoned to perfection, and set on tables in the fine homes of the Israelites ruling classes.

Yet Amos is who God called. This is who God had sent to remind the clean, proper, dignified people of Israel that they are still God's people, that God calls them to be a blessing to others. This is one of the big promises that God made to Abraham at the very beginning, before there was even an Israel. Amos called on God's people to seek justice for all of Israel, and to work to end oppression in their kingdom. God was sending a scruffy, unwashed, peasant, with no status to remind the comfortable that there was still work to be done in God's kingdom.

Let me be clear, there is no sin in being comfortable. There is nothing wrong with working your whole life and achieving financial stability in retirement. The Loving One isn't out to punish you, condemn you, or make you feel guilty for the blessings you have in your life. That is the job of the pastor. I'm kidding! That isn't the pastor's job either. Let's remember that no one was more hated in the New Testament than the tax collector. The representative who gathered exploitive taxes for the Romans, the foreign occupiers in Israel. The Romans who took the crops, labor, and wealth of Israel and did not give back—did not reinvest it in their communities. Rather, they took their cut and sent the rest off to Rome, far, far, away.

The Roman rulers were not concerned if the Israelites had houses. The Roman elite did not care if the Israelites could feed their families, or if they would lose their farms and herds. The only concern that the wealthy Roman occupiers of Palestine cared about was that the Israelites continued to pay their taxes, continued to benefit the few, rather than the whole. And in Amos's time the ruling class—the wealth—looked and behaved a lot like those Romans. They took, they benefitted, they didn't give back.

So God sent Amos to the Israelites as a prophet to call them toward compassion, mercy, justice, and loving others. And not just to have loving feelings, but to take some loving actions as well. God called upon the comfortable Israelites to fulfill their end of the covenant they had made with God. The Loving One was calling them to be as loving, merciful, compassionate, and just as God had been to them when God liberated them out of Egypt, guided them through the desert, and brought them into the promised land where they now lived content, comfortable, and secure.

This is the wonderful thing about God's word. It tells us an ancient story. But it also calls to us today. God's word is a *living* word. It is a *powerful* word. And if we listen to it, pray with it, and dwell in it, it is a *transformative* word. The reading from Hebrews today says, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active." The Word God spoke into the void shaped the whole cosmos. God's word brought life into being, abundant life, even the deer that continue to eat your flowers and hedges. And God said this abundance was good; so too with Jesus, the living word, and so too with scripture, the word of God: Jesus, the Bible, and God's Spirit are always calling us toward abundant life, toward the difficult work of creation, into a new life of grace, blessing, and justice when we have lost our way.

Which brings us to today's gospel. Jesus encounters a rich man who has had a good life. Jesus has a conversation with someone who has grown up in the church, has lived as best they could by the commandments, and is very financially comfortable. The man in this story asks Jesus, "I have a good life, but what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man might be asking Jesus, like the singer Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" to life? to church? to community? After we get our toys, after we buy a home, after we have kids, after we retire what next? God, I am thankful for my life and what I have been given, but what else? Am I missing something? Or maybe we have had some sorrow, some big losses, places in our life that have broken down and we had to start all over again. We too, might be asking Jesus, now what? What is the point?

The same way you may be asking yourself silently, yes Intern Pastor WHAT IS THE POINT? How long do we have to sit here and listen to you? The point is that Jesus tells the good man, the comfortable

man, the man who has his eye on heaven, that if he is really serious. If he wants to follow God to the best of his ability, then he must use what he has been given for the benefit of others. Jesus says, "You lack one thing." And what was that thing?

The man was only concerned with himself. The man said, "What must I do so I can have eternal life. I have been a good person. I have met my obligations. I've done *my* duty. I am ready." Not once did the man say, how can we have eternal life? How can we better follow God? How can I help others? He was concerned with himself. His spirituality was private, personal, comfortable. The rich man wasn't going to worry about anyone but himself. He figured everyone else could get along like he had. Like most of his friends had. He lacked the desire, the need, the commitment in his life to give back.

But the Merciful One is calling us to so much more. Having money isn't bad. It's not about the money. It isn't about how sizeable your 401K or salary are. The parable of the rich man isn't about your status in the community or your standing at the country club. Rather, Jesus is turning our attention to how we use what we have for the benefit of others, not just ourselves.

Jesus is reminding us that this life, our church, our neighborhood, the whole county are part of God's kingdom. Not just what happens to us after we die. Our money won't keep us out of heaven when we die because it won't be going with us.

Jesus, the prophets, the Bible call us to see that we so often miss the point. That we are wrapped up in ourselves and, like the disciples, often ask the wrong questions. Friends, I want to be gentle with you, but I also want to tell you the truth. I need to hear a better story, so I can live a better story.

The truth is, we have let our tools become our idols. We often let our desires become our gods. We are human. We so often make a mess of things that were originally given to us to be a blessing.

I admit it, we live in deeply uncertain times. So much of our daily lives seems to change at an unbelievable rate. We have a deep

longing for security and stability. We want to be comforted. We want to know what's ahead.

Our finances are one way we have made security for ourselves. One thing we feel we are able to control against a deeply chaotic and uncertain future. In our focus on keeping us and our loved ones safe, we often remove God entirely from the equation. I will save myself. I need to earn enough. If I don't do it, who will take care of me?

We are human and it is our tendency to forget all about God. We are human and it is our tendency to make our own gods. We have been this way since the very beginning. The sin wasn't eating the apple for Adam and Eve, but our longing to be like God. It isn't about the apple. It's about our desire to call the shots. To have the power to determine our own fates. What must I do so I can be safe? Have eternal life? Sound familiar?

But God reminds us again and again, through his prophets, through Christ's life and death, and through the scripture this morning we are called to places of abundant life. We are called into blessing and to be a blessing to others. Friends, we are called into the Garden that God has made for us at the very beginning. Not into the cold and lonely vaults of safety, not into our secure and empty fortresses which we have to keep on defending.

Jesus in the reading this week is calling us to wake up. To pay attention. To really look at our lives and our finances. How much are we using what we have, the blessings God has given us, to bless others? How willing are we to begin to loosen our vice grips of control and to instead trust in God to provide for us? How might we grow willing to stop playing God in our own lives and allow God's life-giving Spirit to begin to lead us?

Returning to my great grandmother's farm in Northern Montana: during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many people lost their jobs and their homes. The economy collapsed. The stock market fell apart. Banks closed and people lost all of their savings with no hope of getting it back. During that time, when the price for crops was

almost worthless, my great-grandmother told me they fared better than so many others. But it wasn't luck.

She told me, "We had no money. We couldn't sell what we grew. But we shared. The whole community shared what they had. If we had something someone needed, we worked together to get it to them. If we needed something, others helped us find it. It was tough, things were hard. We wouldn't have made it if we had gone it alone. But we all put our resources together and made sure that we all came through. They all came through. We too, can all come through these times together.

But to do so, we must share the good we have so that we all benefit. Jesus shows us this every time we gather around the table together and hear these words "Jesus took bread and gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying take and eat." So, let us eat. Let us eat together, give thanks together, and bless one another so that we all may be fed.