

20th Sunday after Pentecost (B) 10 October 2021

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 / Psalm 90:12-17 / Hebrews 4:12-16 / Mark 10:17-21

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Today we heard a series of readings about people behaving fairly towards others, about justice, ethics, and about the trust we put in Jesus, who sees us with all our faults and loves us anyway.

And along with some perhaps harsh words and weighty conversations, our readings offer assurances of justice and of God's love, the gift that is so freely given. We've also had the privilege today of praying for Morgan Elizabeth as she was washed in the waters of baptism, into the joy of Christ's community and marked with his cross forever.

So what about this justice that keeps coming up? Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures comes from the book of Amos, a prophet who lived in difficult times and wasn't shy about calling out the Israelite leaders for "trampling on the poor," as he put it. Amos is concerned with the relationship between justice and righteousness, teaching that building an equitable society must be based on right living.

In his world based on Jewish law, a big part of right living meant looking out for the poor. The evils that Amos called out included taxing rather than assisting the poor, taking bribes, and rejecting the needy. These types of inequities may land close to some of our economic

concerns today – tax structures for the poor versus the rich, provision for the neediest people in our communities, leaders who provide this care, or ones who ignore these situations.

And Jesus, an observant Jew, is concerned with ethics in today's gospel reading. We hear the story of a rich man that's also told in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, and the evangelist Mark has his particular spin on this question of how we can enter the kingdom of God.

This is a reading that tackles a basic question of what constitutes Christian identity and discipleship.

The man who runs up to Jesus, who in Matthew's telling is a "young man," and in Luke's version a "ruler," admires Jesus as a teacher and seems to be a wealthy, pious, observant Jew – and that's all we learn about him.

As a wealthy man, we can assume he would own properties, perhaps trade goods, and that he would own slaves to take care of his properties or perform tasks in his enterprises. This earnest guy who has both financial and moral capital comes to Jesus looking for certainty – he wants the exact recipe, what he should do to inherit eternal life, so he also has a fear that maybe not all the bases are covered yet.

And Jesus offers a warning, along with a promise.

Jesus reverses the norms of his society which, like ours, attaches importance to wealth, even believing it to be a sign of God's blessing. That would mean that poverty was a sign of God's disfavor. We may not consciously believe that nowadays, but consider some of our expressions, like the "deserving" poor or the "working" poor, which imply that the rest of the poor may not work or are not deserving.

Jesus warns the man that he needs to sell what he owns and give it to the poor. Maybe Jesus sees that all the guy has – wealth, knowledge of the law, piety – distorts his sense of himself, and of God, and his neighbor. Perhaps Jesus wants him to divest so that he can really live by faith in God.

The promise is that God loves us apart from our wealth and accomplishments, and God even makes special provision for the ones considered of little account in the world. So that those who are considered last, at the bottom, of no importance, will find themselves first.

This is a counter-cultural, even disquieting story about what Jesus may expect of us as disciples.

If we think that what Jesus tells the young man to do seems extreme, think about the story's context. Mark says Jesus is "setting out on a journey" when the young man runs up to him. And where is Jesus headed? He's on the road to Jerusalem and the cross. So Jesus' demand is

no less than what he places on himself, giving not just his wealth but his very life for the world.

As the man comes up to Jesus he kneels, which in Mark's gospel always means a request for healing. So Jesus' words may be a radical prescription for what ails this man who's suffering from anxiety and lack of trust in God. So many of us think that we must have it all, since we own lots of stuff, but there's that anxious feeling that maybe this isn't the meaning of life, that there's something important missing. The answer from Jesus is yes, we need to get rid of whatever may be keeping us from relying on God. It might be material, it might be spiritual, but Jesus asks us to give up our idols, and throw them away.

Our wealth can provide us with what we need, but it may also insulate us from seeing the needs of others. It's morally neutral but can be dangerous, if we start believing that wealth can also tend to our spiritual, our eternal needs.

When I was a little girl living in Dearborn, Michigan, maybe 8 years old, my prize possessions were my dolls, especially my Barbies. A family moved in across the street from us with lots of kids and not many nice outfits or impressive furniture, and my mom decided that us kids were going to put aside some of our toys for the new family across the street. And I was to give away my Barbie dolls. I remember saying "Nooooo" as many times and ways as you can

imagine, but in the end across the street they went. To a new life of being cherished by other little girls.

Jesus looks at the young man in our gospel with love, not mocking him or questioning his sincerity, just loving him. What does Jesus ask of us, and ask *for* us out of love, even if we don't hear it as being particularly attractive? This gospel story may be not nearly so much about the rich young man as it is about us.

How can we be saved? The word "saved" means more than eternal life. It also means "to bring out safely" and "to get along." To be able to get along free from anxiety and entanglements.

But to do that we must trust in someone other than ourselves. Trust the rich young man lacks.

What it means to follow Jesus is to trust absolutely in God's goodness. Yes, we're saved by grace through faith, but maybe it only starts there. What if God also cares about the life we enjoy here and now, with each other, in God's creation?

God's gift of salvation frees us to love others the way Ben and Sarah and Morgan Elizabeth love each other, to care for God's people, to share the Good News wherever God has placed us.

Jesus explained it: "for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." To him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.