

Homily Proper 20, 2025

Year C

Amos 8:4-12

Fr. Robert J. Gaestel

1st Timothy 2: 1-8

St. Luke 16:1-13

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Make friends with unrighteous mammon.” No truer words were ever spoken. These were the watch words at the parish where I was Rector for 42 years. You see, Church of the Angels, besides proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments was also a movie location. Church of the Angels has been used as a movie set since 1943. The location fees were plowed back into the upkeep of the property. After all, every movie needs to include a wedding or a funeral, right? And what about the possibility of, you know, some risqué scenes in the Sanctuary? Well, okay as long as they are tasteful. If they could not do the shoot at COA, they’d go somewhere else, right? So yes, we made friends with unrighteous mammon, all for the greater glory of God.

I’m speaking in jest of course. We took the opportunity both seriously and responsibly. In the making of movies, maybe 10% is glamour and the 90% is just hard work carried out by ordinary working people making a living to go on living in a manner described today by St. Paul in his Letter to Timothy as “quiet and peaceable, godly, and respectful in every way.”

All this is an attempt to make some kind of sense out of what we heard Jesus say in today’s Gospel. It is a commonplace among many that Jesus was one of the world’s greatest ethical teachers. Think of Thomas Jefferson and his own personal Bible. Jefferson took the Gospels and with a pair of scissors clipped out anything of Jesus that he deemed supernatural, and left instead what Jesus said that resonated with things acceptable to an Enlightenment Philosopher. I’ve never seen the Jefferson Bible, so I don’t know what he did with today’s Gospel. It goes back and forth, round and round, leaving one’s head spinning as it begins with a story of a man who served mammon with his whole heart and soul, and was commended for it by the one he ripped off, and ending with “you cannot serve God and mammon. Commentaries on this Gospel by Scripture Scholars are thin to say the least. One has the sense that those who study the text in the original language, using the best analytical tools, throw up their hands at the ethical inconsistencies.

Well, so much for Jesus as simply one among the many of the world’s ethical teachers. One thing that can be said about today’s Gospel is that it blows that notion completely out of the water. So, something else must be at work. That something else disrupts our normal way of thinking and understanding things. It breaks us out of the confines of common sense. It interrupts, it discombobulates, it’s worse than the sound of one hand clapping. Whatever all this is, it matters in an ultimate sense. It is the mystery itself causing us to take it seriously and taking it seriously, to take action.

We are called to take it seriously. But what exactly is the “it” we are to take seriously? In today’s Old Testament, we hear the prophet Amos make a ringing denunciation of Israelite society. He says that as far as religion is concerned, all they do is go through the motions. It’s like the old TV series *Kung Fu*. You had to sit through 25 minutes of the proverbs from Eastern Philosophy in order to get to a beautifully

choreographed fight scene in the last five minutes. Or, it's like people attending a wedding at a church, who while physically present, their minds are focused on the reception to follow. So, for Amos, they do the minimum religiously required and chafe at that, and can hardly wait to get back to the real business of living. They press every advantage for gain even crossing over the boundary from driving a hard bargain to outright fraud. Amos denounces all this in no uncertain terms, but then ends with something that should give pause. Beyond calamity and collapse, Amos speaks of a "famine for hearing the words of the Lord." It's not just absence. It's a famine. What could that be?

I don't have cable TV, but when on vacation in a place that does, I would channel surf. In channel surfing I would invariably land on a TV preacher. On one occasion I stumbled across a female televangelist. She was an older lady and she walked back and forth across the stage scolding and berating the audience, though in a way nicer than Amos. The camera would pan the audience and it showed people smiling and just lapping it up. I looked and thought to myself, "these people are paying money to hear all this." I really don't know what they were getting out of it.

For many people, this is what Christianity is. Christianity is about scolding people for their short comings and bad behavior. That is certainly one dimension of it. Week by week our liturgy reminds us that we have sinned against God and one another by thought, word, and deed. The liturgy says that the result is that we are subject to evil and death. So yes, that is indeed a vital and important dimension to the Christian life. And the antidote is not to ignore this and instead listen to the opposite of the scolding lady evangelist and turn to those whose shtick is self-esteem, which is nothing more than putting wall paper over crumbling plaster. It's not splitting the difference either. The question that needs asking is, what is it all for? Is any of this an end in itself?

Last week we heard about Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the two tablets of the Law only to find that the people had regressed back to making gods for themselves, being sculptures that neither speak nor move, and since they neither spoke nor moved, the people themselves moved and spoke as wild and crazy. It proved that there was a need for guardrails to keep them from driving over a cliff. In today's Old Testament reading we can see the breakdown of a commercial society. A commercial society can only endure if at its head is the free exchange of a good product or service at a fair price. Determining this is difficult, finding the appropriate boundaries is more art than science. But guardrails are necessary. St. Paul speaks to this in his Letter to Timothy where he says that intercession and thanksgiving be made for all, for people who govern, and people in high places being responsible for the good of all. This is so that "everyone might lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way." Some one has to attend to things, to keep the machinery working properly so that things don't go off the tracks.

So, we could ask something. Last week we read that Moses was delayed coming down from the mountain. Another description was that Moses was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. We already know that 40 is a biblical expression for an extended period of time, a long time. Moses is on the mountain for a very long time. Was that long time only about God giving Moses 10 very short directions to convey to the people as a whole? Was that all? One part of the Sinai Narrative is that Moses made repeated trips up and down the mountain and he and God talked together. And not only that, but it also says that God spoke with Moses as a person speaks with a friend. In other words, following Amos today, there was a lot of "words of the Lord," a veritable feast. This feast of words could not just be about

guardrails, though that was part of it. The Sinai Narrative shows the expansion and development of the basic guardrails expanding further into situations that make up human life, and human life under the order of a transcendent God.

Later, human beings would contribute to this in the development of the Wisdom Tradition, human reflection on life as life is in the world as the world is: what works and what doesn't so that with prudence one could lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. But is that all? And even if one could and did all this, could it possibly be an end in itself? Are guardrails and prudence really enough for us? Are guardrails and prudence all that God wants for us?

On Pentecost we celebrate the gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed from the 11th Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. One of those gifts of the Holy Spirit is wisdom. But this spiritual gift of wisdom is not limited to the Wisdom Tradition of human life as human lived in the world as the world. It's really about coming to understand God by God. The gift of wisdom, to understand God by God is a form of charity, God and each of us, where like Moses speaking with God over a long period of time; where God and Moses speaking to one another as friends and for us included, God is loved as friend. So, a gift of the Holy Spirit, the Gift of Wisdom involves the following. It concerns divine things in themselves. It concerns God as known by faith. It's about our deciding in accord with this knowledge, deciding correctly in reference to divine things, and by relating to God as both source and goal. It's knowing God as God in accord with the ultimate end, and with the prudence of knowing how to get to the proper end. All of this greater knowledge leads to more perfect love.

From all this comes something concrete from today's Gospel. You can't serve God and mammon, mammon being a word for money, symbolizing all that is possible to possess and all that is possible to experience, cannot possibly be an end in itself. Only God can be an end in itself. Everything else is really to be only a means, not an end and a means to attain the ultimate end. Down to religious practice, *The Book of Common Prayer* is not an end in itself. It is not a recipe book for doing Church services. It is a means to get to and support us on our path to the end of God being loved as friend.

So, what's at stake? What if we missed this? Would that be a "famine for the words of the Lord?" In the 5th grade I had a teacher who could not control the class very well. As a result, we never completed the 5th grade math book. Missing half the book meant not learning the things necessary to go on, and I never caught up. I'm interested in cosmology. I read about it, but not being able to understand the math, it's the difference between Sunday School and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Amos speaks words God wants said. "I will send a famine, not of bread, nor of thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord and no matter what they do, they shall not find it." It is a catastrophic loss of infinite proportions. Within his own sphere, the Unjust Steward faces the loss of all that really matters to him. It's one of those situations in the Gospel where something less opens a window on to something far more; like Jesus saying, "Which of you, if your son asked for a fish, would give him a snake, and if he asked for an egg, would give him a scorpion? If you who are evil know how to give, how much more will your heavenly Father give..." From less to far more. So, the Unjust Steward sees what is at stake for him and takes direct action.

No, Jesus is not just the world's greatest ethical teacher. Jesus is really about all those pieces in the Gospel that Thomas Jefferson left on the cutting room floor. In other words, all proximate and intermediate ends are for the end that is ultimate, the end for which all others exist.