

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost – Eric Nord

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15d; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

During my years at Penn State, one of the fixtures on campus was “the Willard preacher” – so named for preaching outside of Willard building. From what I could hear he was a hellfire and damnation type preacher who would loudly shout about God’s judgement to the students walking past. He was a campus fixture. As far as I could tell, many students viewed him as a nuisance, or something to laugh at. A few would engage with him and argue with him. But I would often have to divert around that area of campus while on my bike to avoid the small crowd that would gather around to hear what he was saying (or maybe they were just trying to get into Willard building for their next class). In his commentary on Amos¹, Allan Guenther imagines Amos as a street preacher, calling out judgement on the cities of Israel. I imagine something like the Willard preacher.

In the verses preceding the Amos text passage the prophet says (on behalf of the LORD), *But do not seek Bethel and do not enter into Gilgal* (these were sites of worship in Israel, since Israel did not encourage people to go worship in Jerusalem in neighboring Judah). In other words, “Don’t think that going to the place you think of as God’s holy place will save you!”. If Amos had been preaching in Judah, he would have said, “Don’t think the temple will save you!”.

Amos goes on in our text to cry out against those who *turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!* Probably the key verse here is v. 12: *For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.* Pushing aside the needy in the gate is a reference to the city gate, where cases were judged—this is a description of perversion of justice, and using the legal system to oppress the poor.

Guenther describes Amos’ message here as, “Seek God by refocusing on Justice; renewal comes from a deeper consciousness of sin”.

The Gospel text this week is a story that appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, with only slight variations. In Mark’s Gospel this story falls between Jesus blessing the children and Jesus foretelling (again) his coming suffering and death.

In response to this man’s question, in v. 18 Jesus lists 5 (+1) of the 10 commands to the ruler. *You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.* (The “+1” here is “do not defraud”, which is unique to Mark’s account). What is left out? Worship only God; No idolatry; Don’t use God’s name wrongly; Keep the Sabbath; Do not covet. The notes in my study bible for Luke’s account of this suggest that Jesus’s omission of “do not covet” made it easy for this man to say “I’ve kept all these”, and that that his wealth was somehow tied to covetousness.

Of the 10 commandments, the only one that is entirely internal is “do not covet”. A person can covet and not act on that and their sin will be entirely hidden. The other nine commandments certainly have internal dimensions, but they have external faces. So we can make an external show of keeping them even if our hearts are not in the right place. Covetousness, on the other hand, is primarily about the heart.

Rick pointed out to us last week that in addressing the question about divorce at the beginning of Mark 10, Jesus addressed concerns about the hearts of the people who asked the question. In his interaction with the disciples that followed the teaching about divorce, he again focused on the state of their heart. **Jesus is very concerned about the state of our heart.** His message to his

¹ Allan Guenther. 1998. Hosea & Amos. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Elmer Martens and Willard Swartley, eds. Herald Press, Scottdale PA, Waterloo ON.

disciples after this interaction is that wealth/possessions are a problem because they so easily entrap our heart, our attention.

I wonder—what was this man expecting from Jesus? Was he actually expecting to be told he was missing something, or was he expecting an affirmation? Was he like the student who wants the prof to look over the assignment right before the due date just to make sure it is OK?

The disciples seem to have been expecting Jesus to affirm him. After watching this interaction, the disciples are aghast: *then who can be saved?* Were they operating from a “prosperity gospel” viewpoint, where this man’s wealth would be a sign that he was blessed/favored, and therefore righteous? It is as if they are saying, “If Jesus doesn’t tell this rich guy ‘You’ve got this,’ what hope is there for the rest of us poor schmucks?”

If this is the case, Jesus strongly challenges that assumption in verses 25, 27, and 31: *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 heaven...For mortals it is impossible, for not for God...But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

In his commentary on Mark, Timothy Geddert² says v. 25 is clearly hyperbole. The point, Geddert says, is that rich and poor are equally incapable of *inheriting eternal life*—apart from **God’s action**. The problem for the rich is that they are so accustomed to being self-sufficient that they may have a harder time accepting this dependency. The poor are used to being dependent.

Geddert notes that the rich man uses the term *inherit eternal life* and Jesus responds with *treasure in heaven*. Later on, in addressing the disciples, Jesus shifts the language to *kingdom of God*—he is shifting the emphasis from, “How can I guarantee a secure future for myself?” to “How can I participate in the great emancipation that God is working out?” Maybe this is just me, but in Jesus’ answer to the ruler, do you hear echoes of Jesus’ earlier statements about *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be?* In Jesus’ discussion with the disciples, he’s not addressing the “how can I go to heaven” question. It is almost like he is redirecting the question.

Geddert notes that the items listed in v. 29 (house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or fields) cover all of life’s essentials in first century Palestine: home/house = where I belong; brothers and sisters = my people/clan; father and mother = connection to my ancestry and identity; children = my future security; fields = inheritance/Promised Land. Giving up all of these is giving up not just all worldly security, but all your former identity. In return, Jesus says, you will receive much, much more by participating in the kingdom of God.

I think we should hear Jesus’ words in this way: “Put all you have at the service of the kingdom.”

This is consistent with Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (*Seek first the kingdom...*) as well as with the descriptions of the early church in Acts 2 and 4.

This story comes on the heels of Jesus saying, *Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it*. Is this story meant to illustrate one who does not receive it like a little child? How would a little child receive it? The text says *little child*. Are we talking about a child young enough not to worry about what others think? A child who is not yet good at wearing a mask? They can be mean, they can lie, but they don’t go around all day pretending to be someone they are not.

I want to shift gears to the text from Hebrews 4. Maybe it is because I’m committed to non-violence, but I find the imagery here of a sharp, cutting sword to be troublesome. Maybe this is because this seems to create the image of the word of God as a weapon to wound our adversaries with. But reading this again, the image I’m getting is more of a scalpel—sharp and precise, able to divide *soul and spirit...to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*. An instrument of dissection more than

² Timothy J. Geddert, 2001. Mark. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Elmer Martens and Willard Swartley, eds. Herald Press, Scottsdale PA, Waterloo ON.

destruction, wielded by a skilled surgeon, it can also be an instrument of healing.

The key that helped me revise my understanding of this verse came from the commentary in the Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible. The notes for this passage suggest that in v. 12 we should perhaps read “Word” rather than “word.” If we read this as a description of Christ, it makes a lot of sense. Jesus clearly was and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. How many times in the Gospel stories do we see Jesus assessing the state of someone’s heart?

This reading also seems to mesh well with verses 14-16: *We have a great high priest ... Jesus the Son of God ... [who is not] unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy...* Because he knows what it is like to be human, Jesus’ judgement of our hidden, inner heart is compassionate.

I want to suggest that in this interaction with the ruler in our Gospel text, Jesus demonstrates this precise, living sharpness—this ability to cut to the heart of this man, and to the heart of his problem. Here we see the Word of God *piercing until it divides soul from spirit*, and judging the intentions of the heart. (Remember, **Jesus is concerned about our hearts!**) The way he speaks into this man’s life helps me understand verses 12 and 13; Jesus gets right to the sticking point, right to the heart of the matter.

At the same time, Jesus’ response to the rich ruler also demonstrates verse 14-16: *Jesus, looking at him, loved him*. Even knowing what was in his heart, even perceiving his stuckness, Jesus loved him. But Jesus’ love did not let this man off the hook. Jesus is able to sympathize with this man (Hebrews 4:15—he passes all the tests that we fail, but he also knows how hard they are) and still call him to more. It is scary to think about having our hearts *laid bare* (OK, it is scary for me, I am going to assume it is also scary for you so I don’t have to feel alone in this). But Paul here in Hebrews is trying to comfort us with the knowledge that Jesus can be trusted with this knowledge.

In the Amos 5 passage, the prophet calls on the nation to face its sin. In Mark 10, Jesus calls the man with many possessions to face his sin. In Hebrews 4, we see a description of how God’s word/Word can help us face our sin, by exposing what is in our heart.

In the Mark text we see a man who comes to Jesus wanting to know how he can get eternal life for himself; he seems to be hoping that Jesus’ answer to his response, *I have kept all these since my youth*, will be easy, and affirming. Instead, Jesus points to covetousness, to wanting more, to wanting what isn’t ours. The ruler hopes to be justified. Instead, Jesus puts his finger on the place this man is stuck. His *many possessions* seem to possess him, and he goes away grieving—maybe because he can’t give them up at that moment. (Some church traditions suggest that this man did later give them up, and that he became Paul’s sidekick Barnabas).

He *went away grieving, for he had many possessions*. Talk about texts that make us uncomfortable. We are one of the wealthiest societies in the history of the planet! All I have to do is clean my house to realize that I have *many possessions*. Somehow, I can justify all of them.

I can believe he went away grieving. In my experience, it is brutally hard to face our own sin—we really would rather not know. It is even harder when the economic system hides it from us by making us accomplices without knowing it. When I buy clothes made in a sweatshop, I am benefitting from someone else being poorly paid for their work; I am benefitting from their exploitation. But unless I work pretty hard to figure out how my economic decisions affect others, I can have the luxury (?) of ignorance—I don’t have to know how my decisions affect these others. Does this absolve me?

What about my investments? These are somewhat abstract compared to *possessions*. What kind of businesses and business practices do I support via my TIAA retirement account? Is my “retirement security” benefitting from the destruction of tropical forests for palm oil plantations? How about the bottled water companies like Nestle who are trying to privatize drinking water?

Does that increase my returns? Did BP pay the full cost of the damage done by the *Deepwater Horizon*

accident? If not, did my portfolio benefit? How about subprime mortgages, or payday lending?—these practices exploit the needs of the poor and benefit the moneylenders. Does my “investment portfolio” make me one of the moneylenders? In a nation where some \$500 million was spent on lobbying related to health care alone, and total spending on lobbying might exceed \$3 billion, how can I be sure that I am not part of some attempt to *push aside the needy in the gate*, to pervert justice in service of profit?

How do I respond to Jesus’ call here? I am told that we should have \$500K in retirement accounts (and more would be better). I am supposed to “invest” all of this money in “the market”, and a bunch of really smart people out there who use that money to buy and sell and make more money for themselves and for me. But how much control do I have over how they use my money? Can I be sure that they are not (to quote Amos) turning *justice into wormwood* on my behalf?

At the same time, the Jesus I claim to follow tells us *not to worry about tomorrow* but to *seek first the kingdom of God*, and the things we need will be provided for us. If I am really *seeking first the kingdom of God*, how can I be putting my resources into the kingdom of this world?

I reach the uncomfortable conclusion that Jesus’ words to the rich ruler here are also aimed directly at me. But I confess that I don’t have an answer yet, just a growing conviction that my possessions/wealth have far too great a hold on my soul, and that I, like the rich man in the Mark text, may go away grieving, because I have so many possessions. (If you also hear these words aimed at you, let’s have lunch together.) In his commentary on Amos, Guenther says we should ask ourselves “Am I moving toward Christ, or away from Christ?”

Timothy Geddert places Jesus’ conversation with this man within the “Journey to Jerusalem” part of Mark’s narrative, which is bracketed by the restoration of sight to people who were blind. Clearly, the disciples are blind as they don’t understand what Jesus is teaching or preparing them for—James’ and John’s attempt to score seats at Jesus’ side in his kingdom in the following passage highlight this. I think the rich man himself is blind. His focus on “how can I inherit eternal life” is a focus on himself, and he is blind to the needs and suffering of those around him—suffering in which he may be complicit, if we consider the text from Amos.

Lord, open my eyes! Help me to see like you. Give me the courage to act on what I see.

Kyrie eleison—Lord, have mercy.