

St. John's Church
Sunday, September 23, 2007

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

On Saturday evening we enjoyed a marvelous Italian dinner, and some of the workers may still be at home exhausted. At last year's dinner I was introduced as interim, and I joined the family by personally spinning some pizza dough for you! As I've told you during this last year, this parish does a good deal of outreach, and the marginalized of our society are better off because this church is here. Events like the Italian dinner balance those good work as "inreach," a time for fun, for the parish family to enjoy one another's company and have a party. We know that Jesus went to parties where people had a good time — in fact, in the second chapter of John's Gospel, at the wedding in the town of Cana, the presence of his assorted disciples might have had something to do with the wine running out, necessitating the first miracle of his ministry.

Our first lesson, from the prophet Amos, challenges those people who can't wait for the parties and the celebration of feast days to end. Why can't they wait? Not because they don't like to have fun, but instead because they want money — they raise their prices, they trap the poor with crooked balance scales, they sweep up the threshing floor and sell that as freshly harvested wheat.

*If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?
And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*

These words of Jesus are in our Gospel this morning, from a parable usually titled "The Dishonest Steward." Why is this such a memorable story? Because it goes against our expectations of how pious Jesus should be. Other parables, like the Good Samaritan and Good Shepherd, fit our image. But here Jesus praises a smooth-talking swindler who says right out, "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." I remember two brothers, both members of the Jesuits, ordained priests one year. Their ordination invitation included a card with a picture of the two of them, posed like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and this caption below their faces:

"To dig we are not able, to beg we are ashamed — the brothers Privett." Whenever I or my colleagues complain about some hardship, I remember that card. So this steward, this shrewd operator, has something to teach the righteous.

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Why does Jesus put things this way? Don't we start with what is our own **first**, and then move on to include those thing that belong to another? And just what is it to be faithful with

the dishonest wealth? What Jesus is getting at in this teaching story has to do with an indirect way of working on our **internal** integration (our “sainthood!”) in **external** action. When we are at work in the world, we don’t start out as perfectly moral persons. We may have a job that involves collecting money for some boss — & we may notice a temptation to help ourselves to money that belongs to another.

In contrast to spiritual riches, the parable speaks of “dishonest wealth” — riches that don’t really belong to us, but to another. It’s like when we find money. Some time ago I was in a bakery for coffee, and I noticed a \$5 bill on the floor by the counter. So I picked it up and told the cashier about it. She noticed my clerical collar and said she could understand why I turned it in — I wore a clergy shirt. Without thinking, I said it was the other way around: I wear clergy shirts because I am the kind of person who would turn in lost money. But my resentment of her comment didn’t stop there, and I tell you in turn that you are the kind of people who act justly, not because God is some celestial cop. We find out who we are **inside** by watching how we act in the world **outside**.

If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you your own? This really is a strange way to phrase things, don’t you think? Why should we look outside ourselves to find what is our own, what is inside? Can’t we just discover our inner riches (our inner divinity!) off by ourselves? In my experience, it doesn’t work that way. I think we go back and forth, from the inner life to the outer life and back again. Introverted? Extroverted?

It doesn’t really matter. What matters is being honest about our experience, being truthful about how well our inner and outer lives match up. That’s sanctity!

If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? Who but God — God acting in the deepest part of your soul...

The dishonest steward had been wheeling and dealing with his boss’ money. When it was discovered that he had been padding his own profit margin, all he did was to take a personal loss while maintaining profits for his boss. You owed a hundred? “Take your bill, and make it fifty ... make it eighty.’ So Jesus has the rich owner in the parable commend the shifty, dishonest steward for taking a brilliant shortcut. Sadly, *the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light*. The steward hoped to curry favor with the people whose bills he reduced. He took decisive action when the crisis came. What about us? All around us are innovators in Silicon Valley and biotech working very long hours just to be the first at a new solution that will make millions of dollars. Their dedication to earthly accomplishments still challenge the children of the light.

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