

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 23—Year B
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

Well, don't **Amos** and **Mark** tee up a sermon on **giving!** Well, *sort of, not exactly, with some caveats. At a minimum, they put money front and center among those things about which people of faith should be concerned.*

Amos is concerned with the **relationship** between the **those who have and those who have not**, especially when the **“having” comes at the expense of the poor and needy** and even **robs them** of what is rightfully theirs. For **Amos**, it *doesn't matter* how **fine** and **solid your house is**, it *doesn't matter* how **pleasant your vineyards are** or how **fine your wine, if you push aside the needy in the gate** in the **pursuit** of these things, it's **evil**. **Amos** finishes with this admonition: **“Seek good and not evil...Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate.”**

That's a lot of food for thought as we think about **the distribution of wealth in our world** and the **greed that drives it** and **how the poor and needy are trampled, still**, in the name of **economic progress**.

Where **Amos** deals with the **communal** aspects of economic justice, in **Mark's** gospel, **Jesus** brings it right on down to the level of the **individual**.

Jesus is setting out on a journey and a man runs up and kneels right in front of him: **“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** **Jesus** says, **“You know the commandments,”** and then **reels them off** to the man. The **man** is feeling pretty good just about now, **“Oh, I've kept all these since my youth.”** *Boom.*

But Jesus isn't done. **Jesus**, looking at him, loved him and said, **“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”** When [the man] heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. *So not boom.*

Jesus then looks around at his disciples and drops this hard truth: **“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”** He then goes on to use that bizarre image of **“it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”** This gets the disciples' attention, *and ours too*: **“Then who can be saved???”**

Jesus doesn't leave them hopeless: **“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”**

Peter then jumps into the fray, as **Peter** so often does, **“Look [Lord], we have left everything and followed you.”**

And Jesus then says a mind-blowing thing: “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—mind you, *with persecutions*, it won’t be easy—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Jesus is helping us to grab ahold of some **fundamental truths**. He’s calling us to **wrestle hard with the things that we grasp and hold onto for dear life and just can’t release**, and money is just one of those things that can really trip us up.

We think our security rests in what we possess, in what we own, in what we’ve accumulated, in the things we control—that’s what delighted the man about Jesus’ first answer. Keeping the commandments was firmly in his control, but when Jesus challenged that sense of control by asking the man to relinquish what he held most tightly—that realm of the man’s possessions—then we see how stuck the man is.

Uncomfortably, *maybe we see how stuck we are too*, how much control we still want to hold, how hard it is to let go, and how possessed we can still be. *Compared to most of the world, we are rich beyond compare*, and *we know Jesus is coming for us in this story*. We may find ourselves crying out too, “Then who, who can be saved, Jesus?” “Under your own steam, it’s impossible,” comes the reply, “but with God’s help, all things are possible.”

But what Jesus goes on to teach isn’t just about the abundance that comes if you leave it all behind, it’s also about inviting us into the heart of God, who, as the Trinity teaches us, is always all about the flow—the flow of life, the flow of energy, the flow of love, that always turning waterwheel of giving and receiving, pouring out and opening wide to be filled, generating power and life all along the way.

And *this is the heart of any practice of giving and why this practice is central to our life of faith*. When we can *release* whatever it is that we grasp, whatever it is that *we think we possess*, when we can *let go* and *release* through the act of giving, *then* we are also free to open our arms to *receive* what is flowing towards us. It isn’t easy, and Jesus lets us know that **hardship** comes with a **generous response to life**, but oh my, *what you receive in return is astounding*.

When we **cling to money**, or **security**, or **safety**, or **esteem**, or **status**, or **control**, or any of the thousands of ways we find to cling, *we’re stuck*; there’s **no movement**; **nothing is being generated**; we can’t find a way to pour out what we’ve so graciously been given, and there’s **no capacity to receive what God, the universe, our neighbor, so generously want to give us**.

In this sense, **giving is linked to our salvation** in the deepest sense of that word—**giving is integral to our wholeness and our place in the flow of love**.

A **conversation** with my college student recently brought all of this home to me. Apparently, **tithing came up in lunchtime conversation with her friends**. Me, being a priest, became the **go-to person** to answer, what felt like, **trick questions**.

She texted: *“How does giving 10% of your earnings make you closer to Jesus?”* And I responded: *“It helps me remember that everything is a gift from God and simply on loan to me. The spiritual practice of giving helps to remember that everything is blessing and not to get too attached to anything. It helps me to align my priorities. I don’t give to make Jesus love me more, I give because I know that I’m infinitely loved whether I give or not.”*

Then came the **Amos question**: *“Why don’t you give it to the poor then?”* To which I responded: *“Great question,”* while I let *that* question settle and thought a little deeper. I continued, *“We give our tithe to the church and to other organizations that are doing hands on work with those at the margins or who are equipping people to do that work of outreach and justice. People that do that frontline justice work need to be nurtured and sustained so we give to places that do that. And a part of what we give does go directly to those in need.”*

We all have to answer these questions. **Do we give to get closer to Jesus, kind of a quid pro quo?** That’s how **the man in Marks’ gospel** viewed obtaining eternal life; that’s how a lot of **churches preach about giving**, OR **do we give to participate in the flow of love that’s always flowing?** And we have to wrestle with the **Amos question**—how are *we*, and *the resources we steward*, engaging with the poor?

And let me be clear, *this is never just about money, but it is also about our gifts and passions*. Jesus talks a lot about money because he knows how easily we get tripped up here, *but we can also cling to gifts and passions, or neglect them, bury them even, and not offer them out into the world*. Brené Brown once said, *“Unused creativity is not benign. It metastasizes. It turns into grief, rage, judgment, sorrow, shame. We are by nature creative.”* Our creativity, our passions, our gifts—*these are all part of the flow*—things we offer up and things we receive back a hundredfold.

It’s not so much that giving *and* receiving is *a thing we do*, as it is that giving *and* receiving is a way *we live* in the flow, which is just another way to say, it’s how we *live life* in the heart of God.

So, *at the deepest level*, we are compelled to give in whatever way that Jesus and we discern is *right for us*, but that doesn’t answer the question as to *where we are to direct our giving*.

Let’s keep it simple. Direct your giving to whatever and wherever helps you live more deeply in that flow. Think about places that are pouring back out into the world. Think about places that teach you how to let go AND how to receive with grace. Think about places that keep the poor and needy ever in your sight. Think about places that fill you up *so that* you can pour yourself out. Think about places that help you to grow your trust *so that* you are able to relinquish, not just your financial resources or your gifts or your talents, but also relinquish your fear *and* anxiety *and* that voice that whispers, “there is not enough, ever.”

As you have heard from your fellow parishioners over the last few weeks, and now I add my testimony to theirs, *St. Luke's is a place that does all of these things*. It's surely not the only place, but very few places equip us spiritually to live a life of flow like St. Luke's does.

We've seen the ministries that flow from this place *made possible by the dollars you give and the talents you share*; we've heard what this place means to people; we've shared more specifically where our financial resources come from and what they support; and we've offered worksheets, *for your eyes only*, to help you sort through and discern your giving.

Now, we trust you and your household to work it out in your heart with God.

As the **Body of Christ**, we want to *live as a community* what we *seek as individual followers of Jesus*—to live in the flow. And so, as we continue to pour our common life out into the world, *we trust* that we will receive what we need, and a hundredfold more at that.

As voices of scarcity *and zero-sum games and perpetual not-enoughness* take up so much of the oxygen, *we breathe deep in trust, taking Jesus at his word*, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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