

SEPTEMBER 22, 2013: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 8:4-7 I Timothy 2:1-8 Luke 16:1-13

Spiritual author John Shea has often mentioned that the historical Jesus was concerned with answering just three questions: What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?

I presume the answer to the last question is the one we'd most like to avoid. Like Hogan's Heroes Sergeant Schultz our alibi for sidestepping the cost is a simple, "I hear nothing!" Yet it's nigh impossible to claim deafness after hearing today's first and third readings. Both Amos and Jesus follow a God who demands full-time discipleship, not just a part-time carrying out of a few selected and convenient components of God's will.

We must never forget that Amos delivered most of his oracles to the good folk who frequented Israel's National Shrine at Bethel. Despite the priests' opposition, the prophet constantly interrupted the faithful's prayers and sacrifices, reminding them that real faith was to be practiced much more outside those sacred precincts than inside. Yahweh was more concerned with how people related to one another on Sunday morning in the market place than how they related with him/her during the shrine's new moon and sabbath rituals.

"'When will the new moon be over,' you ask, 'that we may sell our grain and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat? We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating!'" No doubt any shrine devotee would cringe when he heard Amos begin his prophecies with the accusation, "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land." The shrine's priest-approved prophets had too much respect for the sanctuary's benefactors to condemn actions or people in a way that would affect their bottom line. They had good reason to ignore the crimes their wealthy patrons committed against the poor. The survival of the institution was more important than the survival of the people. Shrine religion worked best when faith was relegated to the periphery of one's life. It kept the costs down to a bare minimum.

Luke's Jesus deals with a parallel problem in today's gospel pericope. He clearly states his concern: "The children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." His example of the dishonest, squandering steward is classic. Leaving nothing to chance, the man spends a lot of time and effort in assuring a rosy future for himself. Jesus points out the obvious, evil people are more ingenious in plotting evil than good people are in plotting good. Most of the time, the latter usually leave it up to chance. If the "spirit" moves us, and it doesn't cost too much, we'll do good for others.

Perhaps we should examine our consciences when we get up in the morning instead of when we go to sleep at night. It's then that we're actually planning our day, then that we can best embed some good for others into the other things we're going to be doing during that day, and not leave it up to chance.

Following up on our I Timothy author's belief that God "wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth," we have an obligation to make that belief a reality. That's a full-time job, not just an on again/off again pastime.

I can imagine how forcibly the historical Jesus delivered this famous warning: "No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Such a double allegiance reduces the cost of following Jesus, but it'll never give us what we want out of life.

SEPTEMBER 29, 2013: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 I Timothy 6:11-16 Luke 16:19-31

When the historical Jesus demanded repentance of his followers, he wasn't defining the term in the same way Sister Mary Mark did in my second grade first confession classes. As we old-time Catholics learned, in order for our sins to be confessionally forgiven, we had to be sorry for them, make a firm purpose of amendment and repent that we ever committed them. We not only had to confess our sins, we also had to make up our mind not to commit them again. Of course, it didn't take us long to realize that no matter how repentant we were, we usually went back to committing the same sins. A misunderstanding of repentance could still haunt many of us today who learned our faith as children.

Biblical repentance usually doesn't concern itself with our actions; it's more interested in the frame of mind which creates and supports our actions. Most of us remember the old axiom, "Give a person a fish and you feed him or her for a day; teach a person to fish and you feed him or her for a lifetime." Based on today's three readings, we could, "Teach a person to go to confession and take away her or his sins for a day; or teach a person to have a new value system, and take away her or his sins for a lifetime."

Following in the footsteps of the classic biblical prophets, like Amos, Jesus of Nazareth was in the business of changing mentalities. Like all prophets, he had to deal with individuals who looked at people and things from a different angle than God looked at them, especially when it came to dealing with the poor.

I frequently recall the villainous Calvera's reflection on the poor in the classic movie *The Magnificent Seven*: "If God didn't want them to be sheared, he wouldn't have made them sheep." Thankfully the seven men defending those poor Mexican campesinos didn't regard them as sheep.

The rich man in Jesus' story and the wealthy in Amos' audience might not couch their attitude toward the poor in Calvera's exact words, but they certainly share his basic orientation.

Jesus' rich man doesn't necessarily demonstrate any animosity toward Lazarus the beggar; he simply doesn't notice him. Dogs give him more attention. Neither do Amos' "complacent in Zion and the overconfident on the mount of Samaria" seem to "have it in" for the unfortunates in either Judah or Israel. They're just focused on people and things that can maintain their lavish lifestyles. They don't even notice the "collapse" of the country around them. Both Jesus and Amos simply have a different view of reality than people "dressed in purple garments" and those "lying on beds of ivory."

Unless individuals repent and change their value systems, their sins will always be the same.

The Pauline disciple responsible for I Timothy precisely describes the characteristics of a people-and-God-oriented mentality. They "pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness." Their life's goal is not to acquire wealth and prestige, but to "compete well for the faith," to build and maintain proper relations with God and those around them.

Did you notice Amos' complaint about the wealthy peoples' habit of eating "calves from the stall?" The meat they consume didn't come from pasture-grazing cattle; they ate the cuts with the special "marbling" which could only come from cattle which had been fed grain - the grain the poor would have eagerly eaten had it been made available to them instead of the cattle.

Have you checked lately on the source of most of our steaks? Maybe we even need a new mentality about some of the food we eat.