

Stewardship and Religious Life

25th Sunday, C: Amos 8:4-7; 1 Tim 2:1-8; Luke 16:10-13

Our readings this Sunday present a special challenge for applying them to ourselves, the members of a Chapter, the leaders of a community of people who have made the vow of poverty. As I thought about the readings and how they might apply to us, I decided to say something about stewardship and religious life. First I want to look briefly at the Gospel, and then mention two complex challenges we face when it comes to stewardship as religious.

The Gospel of Luke often speaks about wealth and its dangers. The verses of this morning's Gospel string together four reflections on wealth. The first and longest tells about an unjust steward dismissed by his rich employer. We don't know what the steward did, but at least he was not thrown into a debtor's jail. He has time to think and do something about his situation before being finally dismissed. Realizing he is too proud to beg and too unskilled for manual labor (he's a white collar worker), he decides to call in those who owed his master various amounts. Keep in mind it was against Jewish law to take an interest on money loaned.

His master probably knew that his steward collected additional money for himself but at least turned a blind eye to the practice. The steward added his own take to the amount required by the master. Thus, when he slashed his own take, the debtors were delighted, and probably thought that the steward has worked with the master to effect the reduction. How could the master be upset with his steward when his debtors now thought so highly of both of them?

Besides making the master look generous, the steward won a bunch of new friends who were grateful for his intercession on their behalf. Clever fellow. His boss has to hand it to him. The steward not only put himself in the favor of his master's debtors, but also brought to the landowner an honor that he would be foolish to have undone. The moral of the story: Christians should be as clever about their spiritual welfare as the steward was about his material future.

The next saying in the Gospel implies that if a person is trustworthy in small matters, they will also be so in great ones. I suspect that this statement is true in the sense that truly accountable and conscientious people are that way about both small and great matters. We all know people who miss the forest for the trees, who count beans but don't notice the big trends that determine how many beans there will be to count. So even this wisdom saying needs clarification.

The final statement, that one cannot serve both God and mammon plays on two Semitic words with the same root: Amen and mammon. To place one's "Amen," that is one's trust or belief, in mammon is the sin of idolatry. Few people in theory worship money, but in practice many seem to live as if they do. How might the issue of faithful stewardship apply to us?

Those who have been on the Chapter as long as I know that I have never been asked to serve on the Temporalities Committee, and for good reasons. I am therefore not about to try to hold forth on the budget we discussed briefly yesterday or propose some models for greater economic justice in our market economy. To paraphrase the unjust steward, I am unable to carry out an audit and I am too proud to demonstrate my ignorance of economics and math. So, what might I, unskilled as I am, say about this matter of religious stewardship?

You may recall a few years ago that a national study on the mission of religious life concluded that religious should be responding to the peoples' deepest human needs. Keeping in mind this recommendation, I think there are at least two ways of responding to it that run the risk of missing those deepest human needs. The first way is to be inattentive to the needs of the poor. We could easily do this, for example, by sponsoring educational institutions for the middle class that more than anything else assure their children a secure place in the economy.

One of the most attractive qualities of the Cristo Rey high schools is that they really do make a private education accessible to poor children. I sometimes worry about our schools that enroll the children of relatively wealthy families: Are we providing only a safe haven for their children, a place where more than anything else they will get an education that will get them into a prestigious university that will then give a leg up in the job market?

I am not so naïve as to assume that all of our schools should provide only religious formation and train students to do social analysis for sweeping social transformation. We must indeed also teach our students how to think and write and speak and, yes, be good in math. So, I am suggesting in the face of this first possible misunderstanding of stewardship that we religious should engage in all the forms of collaboration we undertake, and in all our educational efforts to impart a genuine concern for the poor, but at the same time help people develop skills that will help others be successful not just in the market but also in making the market more just.

There is a second less than adequate way I think we might be tempted to address peoples' deepest needs. One of my favorite homilists, the Episcopal priest by the name of Barbara Brown Taylor, once said in one of her homilies:

The world turns and conflict flares up like a struck match. A soccer field fills with fresh graves. Believers are shot dead at their prayers. A thin buzzard waits three yards from a thinner child. Every tragedy deepens the question: What is the good news, exactly? Is anyone still listening?

All it takes is one day's headlines to make me wish I had gone into a more practical line of work. I would like to know how to close a wound or set a bone. I would like to land an airplane full of rice and chickens in the middle of the Sudan. I would settle for knowing how to fix a broken well pump. But no, I am a preacher—a public speaker of the Gospel—and the story is all I have.

Perhaps some of you have felt this way; I certainly have. But I also ask myself: Is it not possible that people who have their bones set and their stomachs filled with rice and chicken might well then turn their own attention first to material gain. Recall that when the Berlin Wall fell, many people ran to Western department stores before they went to any churches. Please do not misunderstand me. I believe that we must work in effective ways to do what we can to alleviate the plight of the poor. If the people we work with and the students we educate do not sense that we are serious about correcting injustices, then we will be guilty of ignoring an obvious human need. Nevertheless, as religious, our stewardship is first the living and the telling of the story, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in embodying the life of His Spirit in visible and tangible ways by the way we live and work together.

Interviewed on NBC shortly before his death in 1972, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked, "What is the essence of being human? What does it mean to live a human life?" He replied,

Actually, the greatness of man is that he faces problems. I would judge a person by how many deep problems he's concerned with. A person who has no problems is an idiot. Because a man has problems. And the more complicated he is, the deeper are his problems. I'm not against pleasure, but the greatness of life is the experience of facing a challenge. In a very deep sense, religion is two things. It's an answer to the ultimate problems of human existence, and it is a challenge to all answers. This is a deep ingredient of existence—problems. And the tragedy of our education today is that we are giving easy solutions: be complacent, have peace of mind, everything is fine. No! Wrestling is the issue. Facing the challenge in the issue!

I think being good stewards as religious is a very big challenge—one that involves keeping at least two things simultaneously in relationship with each other: the primacy of the Gospel and the concern for the poor in the light of that Gospel. We would be heartless as human beings not to respond to all forms of hunger; but we would be unfaithful as religious if we do not remember that peoples' deepest hunger is for God.

May the Lord grant us this day, assembling as we have as a newly elected Chapter, the wisdom and courage to face these challenges, and be the stewards we are called to be as religious.

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