

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Mary Shehane

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2010

Amos 8: 4-7, Psalm 113, 1 Timothy 2: 1-7, Luke 16: 1-13

Faithful to God's call

The prophet Amos does not mince words. He may not be happy about being a prophet but he takes it seriously. He was a herdsman and trimmer of sycamore and fig trees who was presented with the responsibility to call to account the rich, powerful and comfortable. Amos' purpose was to break open the veneer of self-satisfied complacency of the leaders of the religious and social life of Israel. He warns his listeners and us that going through the motions of "right behavior" fools no one. Following the rules of religion and the Sabbath but trampling on the needy and the poor is sinful and there will be consequences. Amos proclaims this message during a time of unprecedented postwar prosperity in the middle of the 8th century. And he deliberately proclaims his very unpopular message at the very centers of religious and political life in Israel. Going through the motions of faithfulness is just that – going through the motions.

Many years ago I was an outreach volunteer at New Horizon's Ministry. They provide services to homeless youths. I was talking with a young man during dinner one night at the drop in center. First I need to explain that his young man was very, very challenging. When he arrived at the drop in center there was a sort of collective groan from the staff and with good reason. For several reasons (not the least of which was his love of cats) I was very fond of him. As we talked I noticed him become very thoughtful and somewhat remote. He interrupted me and asked "Are you going to

be here for awhile?". I thought he meant that evening but he corrected me. "I mean are you going to be here for awhile – not just put in your one year 'doing gooding time' but are you going to be here for awhile?" This young man had many problems but self expression was not one of them. I assured him that I was going to be there for "awhile". In fact I was there for 3 years. But more important, I did my best to "be there" for him. Sometimes successfully and sometimes not, but I tried. This does not mean that I was this "golden light" that led this young man off the streets, out of drugs and into wholeness. It means that I walked with him until the end of his story. Because he committed suicide. He died knowing that I loved him and that I would find homes for the two cats he had rescued.

I did find a good home for his cats. And I believe that his decision to accept my flawed love opened his heart to receive the perfect love of Christ waiting for him when he died. I have reflected on our relationship over the years. What could I have done, what would have happened if he had lived, what life would he have lived. What I have come to understand was that I was called to be in relationship with him no matter how that relationship ended. And sometimes, often faithfulness requires a broken heart. I was called by God to the streets for a time, almost fifteen years. And then I was called by God out of the streets and onto a new path. I was called into campus ministry which was confusing. Leaving the streets was very painful for me. I still miss walking

the streets late at night in the certainty of encountering the Living Christ.

The people that Amos is directing his prophetic anger at do not see the poor and the needy. They are refusing the broken heart that God has offered them. They see only their market share. Looking into the face of the “other” is not so easy because we see ourselves looking back at us. When we are able to see fellow human beings with the same desires, and feelings, not just a homeless person, or an addict, or a mentally ill person, or someone who has judged us as failed Christians it is a lot more difficult to walk on by.

Our Gospel reading today reminds us again that all that we do matters. It also reminds us that scripture is not just a rule book because if it were who knows how many more books would be cooked in the name of scriptural literalism. I find this parable of the Shrewd Steward” very strange, at least on the face of it. In preparing this sermon I read a fair number of commentaries. Some of them bent themselves into pretzels to make sense of it. There were a fair number of what I call “What Jesus really meant was....” Commentaries. Some worked very hard to explain away the rich landowner’s praise of the dishonest steward. One going so far as to say everyone in the story, rich man, steward and debtors were all dishonest so Jesus wasn’t really praising bad behavior. Jesus telling this parable and praising the shrewdness of the dishonest steward is a tough one. For me this parable is about being shrewd and faithful in all things small and great. We are all called to joyfully step into the mystery of this life of faith. And to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. There is an obvious tension between being savvy and wise and faithful and confident. As the campus chaplain at the University of Washington, I live in that tension every year

with my budget. I am always right up there on the edge. The question of how to continue to grow with a budget never growing at the same speed as the community is always before me. The temptation to play it safe and not grow or take chances is always with me. We are all called to be shrewd, savvy, holy risk takers.

In our Gospel we are told “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.” God’s understanding of what is very little and what is much is much different than ours. No life lived or action taken is unimportant. To quote Sam Portaro, Episcopal priest and author, from his compelling book, “Transforming Vocation” – “We must embrace the truth that every baptized Christian is responding to the compelling love of God, offering his/her self life and labor in solidarity with God’s work and will for the world. Every believer is called to discipleship, and a disciplined life of self-examination and self-giving, a perpetual discerning of vocation that lies at the heart of the church’s confessed mission to serve not only its members but all people throughout the world.”

So here is my invitation to all of us – let us embrace the person God has called each of us to be. I pray we will listen to the persistent, quiet voice calling each of us to a mysterious future we can not know until we get there. And when our hearts break, I pray that we understand it as a gift. May we accept our gifts for what they are, large, small, ordinary or strange and offer them to the world in the name of the Living God. Amen.