

25th Sunday
9/18/2022

DETERMINATION

Today's gospel shares the parable of what we call the Unjust Steward. First things first, what's a steward? Then as now, a steward is not the owner, not the master. A steward is someone to whom the owner entrusts something to care for, to protect and guard, but eventually to return to the rightful owner. A steward administers what belongs to another. He's called the unjust steward while the gospel describes him as prudent but you could call him shrewd, crafty, conniving and very determined. 3—After robbing the owner, he robs him again. In doing so he's looking to make friends who will help him out when he loses his position.

There's a terrible trap this steward fell into and that was thinking he was the owner of what was entrusted to him rather than its caretaker, its steward. And there's a lesson in all that for us. God is the owner, not us. We are stewards and what is given to us is given to us for a time. Ultimately, it doesn't belong to us but is entrusted to us to help build up the common. Catholic Social Teaching speaks of it being under a social mortgage, something to be used to help others.

Obviously, that applies to our money. We're not to spend it all on ourselves but to use it for good, the common good. But it applies to other matters as well.

We have a tongue that we can use to praise God, speak the truth, build up others and make the world a better place. We can also use that same tongue to be profane, to lie, to gossip and tear down others and make the world a worse place. We have an intellect and some level of education that can be used or misused in a similar way, rightly or wrongly, selfishly or generously. There's the gift of time that we can use in a mode of self-seeking or self-giving. There's our freedom that we can use to grow in virtue or misuse by growing in sin. The prophet Amos condemned those who were corrupt, particularly those who gained wealth by exploiting the poor.

All of this so far is certainly challenging but straightforward but then the story gets more intriguing and even puzzling. You would expect his master who has already been cheated, upon learning that he is still being cheated, to get angry. But he doesn't. Shockingly, he commended this unjust steward because he was prudent

in terms of practical wisdom. He commended him for his craftiness and determination. You could say that in terms of worldliness or at least savvy, they were both cut from the same cloth.

What does all this mean? Does Jesus commend being dishonest? Well, no. Jesus isn't telling us to be dishonest or to cheat. Jesus says elsewhere, *I am the truth*. Are we supposed to admire this steward's corruption? No. Are we supposed to admire his determination? Yes, absolutely yes. He is a driven man and while we may not appreciate what he did, we can most definitely appreciate the persistence with which he did it. We're not to imitate the embezzling steward in his thievery but in his determination.

Obviously, that determination is to be directed to what is good and true. Jesus chides his followers, pointing out that those seeking spiritual and eternal goals could learn some determination from the zeal of worldly people for worldly things. What if we applied some of the same energy we apply to our hobbies, to say nothing of our careers, to our spiritual lives? What if we spent as much time in prayer and spiritual reading as we do watching TV? What if we spent even half that amount of time in prayer and spiritual reading? What if as the weekend approached, people would hang banners from their homes and their cars anticipating Sunday Mass and wear the liturgical color of the day? What if they came to the parking lot three hours early?

This parable goes on to tell us to use what has been entrusted to us for good. Commenting on this passage, Pope Francis has noted, *Wealth can propel one to build walls, create division and discrimination. Jesus... encourages his disciples to reverse course.... to change goods and wealth into relationships, because people are worth more than things.*

We're to love people and use things. What the prophet Amos and so many others have condemned is the opposite. We can fall into that trap of thinking we are owners rather than stewards. Created things have been given to us to help us know, love and serve God. Insofar as they help us do this, they're good and insofar as they distract us, they're bad. Wealth and possessions carry with them responsibilities to use them well and help other people realizing that we will be separated from our possessions in the end.

So often in Catholic thought we speak of *both/and* rather than *either/or*. We insist that Jesus is both human and divine. We speak of the human person being both made in the image and likeness of God and also marked by the stain of original sin. And yet sometimes there is still an *either/or* and we find that today as this gospel concludes: *You cannot serve both God and mammon*. This is definitely an *either/or*. To let anything or anyone, including money, take the place of God is to fall into idolatry. Money makes a good servant but a cruel and ultimately idolatrous master.

All this is challenging but Jesus challenges us for our own good not, only for the future, but for today. With lives of intentional faith, encouraged by one and nourished by the Eucharist, may we accept that challenge and run with it. May we imitate that unjust steward not in his corruption but in determination. With God's help, may we prove faithful stewards and direct our determination toward the good of others, our everlasting good and the glory of our God.