

Workin' for the Kingdom – Pent+18C -- Proper 20C

We talk a lot about the metaphorical meanings to be gleaned from scripture. So many of the thoughts and images and exhortations of the Bible, especially the Hebrew books of the Old Testament don't make much sense to us if taken literally. Psalm 136, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, to take just one example, echoes the cry of a conquered people saying, "O Babylon, destroyer, happy the one who repays you the ills you have brought on Jerusalem; they shall seize, and shall dash your children against the rock." Whatever its origins in historical fact, this image is now useful to us only as a metaphor – and an awful one at that – for confronting enemies of the soul, things that attack us from within. I can't imagine anyone sane promoting baby dashing.

Today's readings, however, are different. Today we have explicit, if somewhat puzzling instructions and reflections for our own time and culture. Today we talk about Business Ethics. In Psalm 113, God is identified as the one who raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with the princes of the people. In other words, God intends for humankind to remain in motion – continually looking for ways to raise those who are literally down in the. Our passions and energies must, at least partly be directed towards lifting up those who are down and helping them attain peace and well being. This being the intention and action of God, anything we do that interferes with such movement goes against God.

The prophet Amos provides some explicit and colorful examples of the consequences, in describing the activities of those who go against God. They cheat innocent people by making their weights of measure for buying falsely small (also known as gypping, or cheating). The weights they use for measuring what they sell are falsely large (price inflation, padding, bait and switch, or any hotel with a gorgeous lobby and crummy rooms). These are God's enemies, who buy the poor for silver, says Amos. Think of all the luxuriously decorated goods advertised and sold to people who can't afford them. Or how about our lotteries, whose tickets are mostly sold to the poor with patronizing and misleading alarm: 'You can't win if you don't play.' The lottery is a tax on the poor, masquerading as opportunity. "You buy the needy for a pair of sandals," accuses Amos (corner the market, shorten supply to increase demand, build in obsolescence). And sell the sweepings of the wheat. Ever look at the ingredient list of fast foods and mass-produced, longer shelf-life groceries? This is especially true of foods sold to the poor, where many a child will come to school clutching Cheetos and Nehi for breakfast. It seems as if the lower the price of our food items, the more ingredients they contain, few or none of which contain any nutrients. And we wonder why diabetes is on the rise.

One thing about having young people in your life is exposure to some rather more provocative (ie: raunchy) televised and recorded entertainment. One of the "highlights" for me has been increased familiarity with contemporary standup comedians who tend to be very raunchy indeed, and also very funny. Louis CK, for example, has a sublime bit about the breathtaking arrogance of the

encounter between European Christians and the people who already lived on this continent. The Europeans wanted to go to India, they had important business plans concerning India. When they got here, they thought they had reached India, and they said to the people they met, "You're Indians, right" To which the people responded, "No, actually we're Pequots." (or Powhatans, or Chumash, or Seminole) "Naaah, come on, you're Indians, right?" "No, we're Powhatans." "Seriously? Admit it, you got to be Indians." "No, seriously, we're Seminole people." And what did the Europeans say to that? "Awww, you're Indians." And they still are.

These kinds of business activities and this kind of arrogance are what will get us in big trouble with God; they fly in the face of God's purpose for us. The abuse and manipulation of others for our own gain divides and alienates us from others, when if there's one thing God would have us do it is move towards each other in kindness. This is what Paul is asserting in his letter to Timothy: the universalism of God inevitably demands that we be open to the Other, that we accept the Other in terms broader than our own. Paul also reminds us to pray for everyone, especially kings and those in high positions. It is because they are the ones making decisions that will affect so many people. Must we not today include fervent prayers for those in power in our businesses, Product Developers, Corporate Strategists, Advertising Directors, CEO's, that they not be arrogant or abusive, that they not mislead or manipulate, that they fill not thy hot dogs with floor sweepings?

Jesus, as is his habit, likes to deal more in positives than negatives. Cleverly woven into his parables are all the recipes for ethical and moral living – how to be godly, righteous and sober – that we could want. These messages presented serious challenges to the systems of the synagogue and the Roman Empire. Jesus' parables challenged the systems so boldly that he was killed for telling them. They challenge our systems too.

Following Luke's rendition of the Prodigal Son story, today we encounter a puzzling narrative about what sound like some shady characters. When it looks like the boss is going to fire a certain manager, the manager runs around to the best clients and brazenly carves off nearly half the accounts receivable for himself. And the boss says, "Wow, that was a slick move; nice going." Nobody knows whether it was a 'nice going, you can have your job back,' or 'nice going, but you're still fired;' scholars have been arguing about it for nearly two thousand years. But Jesus' point is not that these are attractive or otherwise virtuous folks. What he says is that if knuckleheads like this, who aren't necessarily concerned with being upright, can use their wits to survive and flourish and understand each other, how much more is possible for those who try to work with God, towards God's vision.

It is an odd example, but it sets the bar low enough that all of us can hop over it and get to feeling good about ourselves. Whatever environment or marketplace or milieu we operate in, our energies, our imagination and our wits can be summoned and directed towards God's purposes. And when, at the end of each day, we realize that we have

been – more or less – pointed in the right direction, we can be thankful.

There is a story about a concert in Chicago by the great cellist Rostropovich, who had been stripped of his Soviet Russian citizenship for publicly advocating human rights and artistic freedom. With the orchestra, he played a Dvorak concerto last, and when they finished the crowd sat silent, mesmerized. Then Rostropovich stood up, leaned down and kissed his cello. The hall erupted with cheers. Then he hugged and kissed the surprised Conductor, followed by the entire cello section before moving on to the violins. What the great man realized was: the music they had just made was the result of many people's efforts, from the composer to the cello maker to the rest of the orchestra. It was an occasion for loving gratitude. Not many of us will be virtuosos, on the cello, or otherwise, but each of us does encounter opportunities every day to do our best at whatever it is we have been given to do, and to be grateful when our work enhances the lives of others. Only then will we be truly and gainfully employed: working for the Kingdom.