

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

September 30, 2007

Text: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

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“Life That is Really Life”

The readings from Scripture appear to be about wealth and money. With the prophet Amos they are not about money but with its abuse. And in the second reading there is the famous phrase “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Contrary to popular theology, the writer does not say money is the root of all evil, but the **love** of money. So the texts are about our loves.

As St. Augustine taught long ago, all creation is good and to be used with thanksgiving. It is **how** we use creation that is the question, and in this case, **how** we use money. How do we approach money and how do we live with it? How do we love?

Amos rails against the abuse of wealth by the ruling elite of Israel. No doubt widows and orphans starve as the rich elite gorge themselves. But in this context Amos is bringing judgment because the elite are too busy “snorting drugs” than ruling their nation now under serious threat of invasion. In Amos’ mind the nation is already dead even before foreign troops will finally drag them into anonymous exile and slavery. It was not the money but the use they made of their money that brought the prophetic ire. Their love was petty and self-centered. It was not ethical.

In the same prophetic tradition Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Pharisees, whom Luke describes as “lovers of money,” confront Jesus. Because they won’t hear him directly, Jesus uses the indirection of the parable to invite his Pharisee brothers to rediscover compassion for the poor and thus to think ethically, to take responsibility for their misguided love and do what is right in God’s eyes.

Again, it is not the possession of wealth that is on trial, but our attitudes toward it – whether it is in the orbit of what we really love and live for or whether we steward this gift ethically.

Of what use is a church if it doesn’t call us into examining our assumptions about what is really important in our lives? Of what use is a preacher if he or she doesn’t teach us to live ethically and, ultimately, to be open to God’s grace shining into our lives? And so Jesus’ parable, while directed to the Pharisees, is also directed at us. And the same condition applies: do we have compassion for the poor or are we in love with our money?

It is one thing to recognize that we need money to pay for the necessities of life. Without it we will be on the streets. And these days, many are on our streets because they cannot handle the stability of a job and its responsibilities in order to earn the money to keep on the inside of a door. So they end up on the outside of the door and on our streets.

The Scriptures make plain today that money can become the object of our affections, in which case, according to Martin Luther, it then becomes a god. A god, Luther said, is what you ultimately run to in times of need. By that definition there are no atheists for a god is simply what you put your deepest trust in. For Luther, it was to run and hold the baby Jesus in his arms. What ethical simplicity! His god was holding the warm infant Jesus in his arms and the

joyful love of that ordinary human experience with the extraordinary child. What is your god? Each one of us has to answer that.

In the second reading there is another famous phrase: “We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” This is a foundational thesis to the case the writer makes that we ought to be content with food and clothing and to strive for the great virtues of faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

This too is living life ethically with a sharp clarity of the human condition between birth and death. Oh how we blur that simple clarity of our human condition with our self-deceptions and gods! Only then, stripped naked of all the little gods we set up in our lives, do we learn to hunger for a forgiveness beyond us and the gracious gift of the Spirit to help us live together, ethically and joyfully.

And as for the rich among us: they are encouraged delightfully by the writer to Timothy to be rich in good works and generosity. What a wealth of wisdom!

But the greatest word of all for us this morning is contained in the final words of the second reading –that by living in the grace of Jesus Christ, even as we strive for those Christian virtues of faith, love, endurance and gentleness, we take hold of the *life that really is life*.

And, contrary to the wisdom of this world and of our modern culture, in that life that really is life, money and the possession of it is a gracious accident –not its essence or its goal. Another great reminder for us all.

Perhaps you ask what it means to be ethical, to live ethically? I present to you a straightforward answer. Each one of us simply has the capacity to be moral, to be ethical. No arguments or theories –just common sense. It simply means, perhaps with the aid of the Ten Commandments, that each of us must discern what the ethical is in our situations in life. What is our reward? The joy of acting ethically.

Amos acts ethically in his time and place. Jesus acts ethically in his. We are to act ethically in ours. I can't prove this. It can't be proved. I can only remind you of what you already know by showing you the ethical in a modern parable.

Thousands of Buddhist monks gloriously arrayed in saffron march unarmed down the streets of Burma calling their mindless military government to moral judgment, calling for freedom and democracy? What is their glory? The ethical.

The real glory is that they went unarmed against an army armed to the teeth, fully conscious that they were walking into the jaws of death. And some, perhaps many, have met their death. They did not flinch. They were armed with the ethical, with righteousness and truth. That is the ethical. That is life that really is life.

In our religious tradition there was one monk, the color of whose robe we do not know, who entered Jerusalem unarmed against the might of the religious and military establishment, in full knowledge that he would die. He went anyway, armed with the ethical and met death. And from this Jesus we have life that really is life.

Let us live that ethical life in our own lives. Let us receive the grace to live Jesus' life in our own. Let us be good stewards of all creation, using but not abusing all of God's good gifts; stewards of our bodies, our minds, our money and our lives –stewards of our planet. For such begins life that really is life. Amen

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