

September 18, 2022

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Luke 16:1-13

In today's second reading, we heard, "(God) wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth." That verse, taken from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy, calls to mind for me someone who had great influence in my life and especially my ministry. Some of you, I am certain, will remember Father Joseph Schumacher. He was a priest of our diocese and of its predecessor Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth for over sixty years. He served many north Texas parishes in those sixty years, and he spent his retirement years here with us, as a member of Holy Family. In 1974 he was honored with the title of monsignor, but to his death on November 1, 2018, All Saints' Day, he preferred to be called Father Schumacher or Father Joe. My relationship with Father Joe had a rather awkward beginning. He was vicar general of our diocese during the time I was in deacon formation. On a visit to the small parish out west where I grew up, he met my mother. In their conversation she told him that her son was preparing for the diaconate, and he asked my name. When my mother told him, he responded, "Never heard of him." In time Father Joe and I became well-acquainted, he learned my name, and he eventually became a good friend and my spiritual director. I cannot tell you the number of times I heard him quote that verse from First Timothy, "(God) wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth." And then, with tongue in cheek, he would usually add, "If you want to go to hell, you're going to have to work at it." So, what did Saint Paul mean by those words? "(God) wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth." Paul knew that we do not earn our way to salvation. It is a gift from God, a gift that we can either accept or reject. As with any gift sincerely offered, God

wants us to accept the ultimate gift of salvation. But God also gives us the ability to reject that gift. How? The 25th chapter of Matthew is most explicit in telling us that we reject God's gift of salvation when we fail to feed the hungry or give drink to the thirsty, when we do not welcome the stranger, when we do not clothe the naked, and when we do not care for those who are ill or in prison. "What you did not do for one of these least ones," Jesus said, "you did not do for me." Matthew 25 ends with Jesus saying, "And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." The words of Jesus are clear – when we reject the needs of the poor and vulnerable, we reject God. And when we reject God, we reject our salvation.

Care for the poor is, and always has been, a core teaching of the Church. The prophets insisted on it for centuries. Today's first reading is taken from the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Amos, which is believed to have been written some 750 years before Christ. In modern terms, Amos was a farmer and a rancher. He owned livestock and orchards in the southern kingdom of Judah. In this reading, we hear Amos rail against his fellow landowners and merchants, "who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land." Amos knew the tricks of these privileged entrepreneurs. Outwardly pious, they observed the Sabbath and holy days faithfully. But their business practices were shady and driven by greed. They inflated prices and manipulated measurements to increase their wealth at the expense of their tenants and other impoverished victims. In the end, Amos wrote, God will not forget what they have done.

Our Gospel reading is also a reflection on economics and care for the poor, but with a little different twist. Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who fires his steward for allegedly squandering his property. Now we should know going into this parable that this rich man was most likely not above reproach himself. He probably built his wealth on the backs of poor

workers. The fired steward is desperate. He is left without a livelihood. So, he comes up with a scheme whereby he unilaterally reduces what each debtor of his former master owes. When the master learns about this scheme, he does not become angry, as we might expect that he would. Instead, he commends the steward for acting prudently. The master is shrewd enough to understand that the debtors were probably not going to be able to repay their entire debts. They would likely default and be sent to debtors' prison. And he would be left with no repayment. By reducing the debts, the steward made it possible for the master to recover at least some of what he was owed. The debtors were relieved of debts they could not repay and spared possible incarceration. And the steward made some new friends who might be motivated to help him with his predicament. What the steward did was not right, at least not in the way he did it, but it made things better for all involved, especially for the poor debtors.

This is the second week in a row where we have heard Jesus teach with a parable about grace and forgiveness overcoming poor decisions and devious actions. Last week we heard the parable of the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance and was welcomed home by a loving and forgiving father. Today we heard about a devious steward who squandered his master's property, but also relieved the unreasonable burdens of poor debtors. And in the end, he was commended by his master. Jesus did not tell these parables to encourage us to follow the examples of the prodigal son and the devious steward. But he is showing us that God's love and forgiveness can wipe out even our worst mistakes, and he is encouraging us to show similar love and forgiveness to others, especially the poor and vulnerable.