

[Readings: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13]

There's an old story that you may know about a young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise. "I'm afraid the horse has died," he explained. The young man said, "Well, then give me my money back." The farmer said, "Can't do that. I spent it already." The young man thought for a moment and said, "Ok, then, just bring me the dead horse." The farmer asked, "What you going to do with a dead horse?" The young man said, "I'm going to raffle it off." The farmer said, "You can't raffle off a dead horse!" The young man said, "Sure I can. Watch me. I just won't tell anybody he's dead."

A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, "What happened with that dead horse?" The young man said, "I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece and made a profit of \$998." The farmer asked, "Didn't anyone complain?" The young man said, "Just the guy who won. So I gave him his two dollars back." There's an enterprising man!

We might even call him something of a con man. There's something about a con man that captures the imagination. A favorite film of mine is called "The Flim-Flam Man" starring George C. Scott. Indeed, Amos says the same thing about his world 2,900 years ago. He judges the political and religious leaders of his day and warns of the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of inward corruption and outward military attack. He condemns them for enjoying a wealthy and comfortable life at the expense of the general public and for the neglect and abuse of the poor.

Jesus tells a parable today about a man with that kind of wily disposition. He, too, was something of a con man. This guy's ethics were certainly out of whack, but his sense of survival was kicking in at full speed. He used his privileged position to buy himself some friends so that he would have somewhere to turn when he was out of a job. He was taking a risk, of course the risk that his boss would have him thrown in jail. That's what could have happened. But the amount he cut off on the debtor's bills was HIS commission, not his boss's!

Jesus thinks outside the box. Listen to how Jesus ended this little tale: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world," said Jesus, "are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than

are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” Did we hear right?

In most of Jesus’ parables, the manager represents God. What does this mean? Does God like con men? That would be outrageous. We glamorize con men, but the truth is they take advantage of weak and unsuspecting people. I suspect God despises the attitudes and actions of con men and con women. Jesus wants us to stretch our minds and our spirits. This is how we grow.

There are some possible reasons why the master commended the dishonest manager in Jesus’ story. There are at least three points. *Jesus likes people of action, people who are **trustworthy**, and people who **serve**.*

There are times that call for immediate action. God wants us to pray when we are in a difficult situation, but God also wants us to act. Pick up the phone. Enlist the help of family or a friend. Learn some new skills. Don’t sit there passively and expect someone else to rescue you.

We have a phrase that’s not heard much anymore. Have you ever heard someone say, “He worked like the dickens”? The “dickens” is not a reference to Charles Dickens. It is another name for Satan. In fact, you may hear someone say, “He worked like the devil to get it done.” Some even say that they work like hell, the place where Satan lives. The implication is that the devil is always busy seeking to achieve his wicked ends. He never misses an opportunity to tempt, to discourage, to embitter. I guarantee you that if you hit a rough patch in the road, and you sit around feeling sorry for yourself, the tempter will move in quickly and work like the dickens to cause you to quit trying.

Jesus says that we Christians don’t have that same tenacity toward the things of God. The devil works harder than you and I do to get the job done!

Jesus says, use worldly wealth to gain earthly friends so that in eternal dwellings you’ll find a heavenly home. What does this mean? It means that if we can be trusted with things of this world, then we can be trusted with things of eternity. We are not to increase our standard of *living*; we are to increase our standard of *giving*. Why?

We come to our second point, trustworthiness. When all our money is gone, when we have left our possessions to others, how we have used our resources HERE will determine our welcome up THERE. Do you know that one of the wisest things you can do with your money is give it away? I’ll be happy to take your money now for St. Martin de Porres Parish.

Why? Because, and this may sound a bit strange, Jesus says that gaining friends through generous gifts means you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. In a word, if you give HERE you'll be welcomed THERE.

Let me be clear – we do NOT buy our way into Heaven. We can get there if we have hearts full of gratitude that leads to a very generous response of stewardship.

When I was an associate pastor in Marine City, the parish school principal had this slogan above front blackboard of every classroom: "If it is to be, it is up to me."

Billy Graham said it all: "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost."

And that is why, third, we must be people of service. You will hear in today's announcements and you will read in today's bulletin the many ways you can come forward to minister, to serve, to fill the many holes that are open.

This week's reflection questions: In what ways do you feel exploited -- as a citizen, a consumer, a member of the Church? Is there any group you have exploited or feel tempted to exploit?

Have you ever used trickery to bring someone to do God's work? Have you ever been tricked into being a better person? Did you feel the ends justified the means? In what ways can you be more clever about your faith and serving God and the poor? Who's the cleverest living Christian you know? What lessons can you learn from them?

In today's Gospel, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, to His betrayal and death. Throughout His ministry, Jesus has "squandered" the riches of God's mercy and forgiveness on tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners and us. He takes everyone's bills and erases our debt to God trusting that the Father will indeed be generous and giving and will forgive us. Jesus has "fixed the books" and nailed our debt to His Holy Cross. Action. Trustworthiness. Service. These are the true riches and what it means to be a good steward! May we go and do the same. "If it is to be, it is up to me!" AMEN!