

25th Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *In praise of prudence.*

September 21-22, 2013

Readings: Amos 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 15:1-32

“Prepare a full account of your stewardship.” With these words, Jesus challenged his disciples to deal with the reality of their lives and their accountability to God. To whom are we really accountable in this life? Many people recoil at the thought of being held accountable by others for practically anything in their lives. Yet, Jesus reminds us that if we are trustworthy in little things we will be trustworthy in the larger ones as well.

There are both remarkable insights in this parable, such as our need to serve only one Master, our Lord and Savior, as well as inherent difficulties that cause many to scratch their heads in confusion. The seeming incongruity of a parable that praises a scoundrel was even cited by Julian the Apostate in the 4th c. to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith. The Church has had to answer the claim that evil is being rewarded.

The most probable cultural setting for today’s parable is that of a large estate divided into portions, with the business affairs of that estate entrusted to the steward. At face value, an unjust steward is being praised for being clever, as he reduces the debt without authorization of the landowner. If the renters thought that the steward was acting without the approval of the landowner, the risk would be too great to agree to the deal. The steward receives credit for having arranged such a good deal between the landowner and the renters. The owner ends up looking very good.

But Jesus was not praising the steward’s dishonesty as much as his ability to recognize the generosity of his master, to see what was coming- and to use what he had at the time to obtain something far

greater- his own self-preservation. The manager cleverly canceled the excessive interest he required for his own personal profit, for he had been given lots of latitude in managing the estate.

I witnessed first hand an action somewhat like this parable. When I was a much younger priest, serving as a High School religion teacher in the early 1990's, I spotted a student skipping out from school in order to grab lunch at a Subway sandwich shop. Unfortunately, he picked the same day that I happened to be there with a member of the school administration. When our eyes met and he realized that he was caught red handed, he immediately approached and asked somewhat sheepishly, "Father, could I go to confession right now?"

I smiled and said, "Certainly...but of course Mr. Smith over there (pointing to another teacher whom he had not seen) is not bound by the seal of the confessional...**Nice try**- but you just earned a detention!" Obviously, this would have been a misuse of the Sacrament for this young man to try to keep me quiet. At the same time, the young man understood quite well what I had taught in class about the seal of the confessional! Today, he is a strong Catholic, married w/ children, and guess what- he is an attorney.

If the unrighteous steward was praised for trusting the master, *how much more* will you be rewarded if you trust the true and holy Master, the Lord Himself? Jesus uses the rabbinic principle of showing "how much more." That is, if the persistent widow received what she wanted from the judge (Luke 18:1-9), *how much more* you and God? If the man received bread at midnight from his neighbor (Luke 11:5-7), *how much more* you from God? The manager was prudent, clever and resourceful. There are times when we need to employ these gifts in order to thrive and at times even to survive.

As a cardinal virtue, prudence disposes our practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. St. Thomas Aquinas called prudence- “right reason in action.”¹ Today, we face a real crisis in society with respect to the Church, and we have to find creative ways to engage God’s people, including those who have become distant from the Church.

In a recent interview that made international news, Pope Francis spoke about his approach to ministry and what he believes is needed today. He used a fresh image for the Church, noting that:

“the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.... And you have to start from the ground up.”²

While affirming established moral doctrine, the Holy Father is reminding us that we need to begin with mercy, not allowing the Church to be pigeon-holed and defined by only a few key, even if vitally important issues. He is charting a course calling for a different tone, recognizing that in too many cases our people have become disillusioned. He is asking us to be patient with people in their struggles, and to be shepherds and healers. It is powerful food for thought for every pastor, and is borne out in confessional lines here at the Cathedral, offered six days a week.

Let us daily pray for prudence, asking God to help us discern the right course, so that in the words of Saint Paul in our 2nd reading, we may “lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity.”

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica II-II*, 47,2.

² “A Big Heart Open to God: Interview with Pope Francis,” *America Magazine*, 30 Sept. 2013