

October 13, 2024
Lectionary 28, Year B
The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Mark 10:17-31
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Yikes!

For those who don't know, Mondays are my day off and last Monday, I took my own advice. If you attended worship last Sunday you might remember that during the announcements I encouraged everyone to start going through their closets and basements and attics and cupboards, looking for things that they didn't need or want anymore, so that they could donate them to the rummage sale.

Well, I took my own advice. I have closets and rooms that I've been intending to go through, and, given that the rummage sale is less than two weeks away, I figured I'd better start sorting through them. So, I did. I had asked Julia a while ago if she was okay if I did a little work in her room while she was at college, and she said yes, so I started with her closet. But then, you know how one thing leads to another? Next thing you know I was sorting her dresser, my own closet, two bookshelves, and a big box of stuff that we removed from Julia's room a long time ago, like four years ago thinking that at some point we would go through it to see what she wanted and what she didn't. It has been sitting in our upstairs hallway ever since.

A friend, who knew how I was spending my Monday sent me a text later in the day asking me how the project was going. My answer was, "Overwhelming." I do have several bags of stuff ready for the rummage sale, which is good, but there is so much more to do and I'm just not sure I'm going to have time between now and then to get to it.

I'm trying to focus on what I did get accomplished rather than on how much more there is to do, but sometimes it's hard. Have you ever gone through your

house and gotten a bunch of stuff out of it and then noticed, that the house actually feels lighter? I have. It's a great feeling. I was hoping that I would get to that feeling after my Monday clean out, but I didn't. I don't think that I did quite enough to get me to that lighter feeling. Right now, I'm feeling pretty burdened by my possessions.

Every week, for prayer group, if I'm going to be leading prayer group, I go through the scriptures for the upcoming Sunday and choose one or part of one for us to meditate on during prayer group. This week, when I did that, my reaction to today's scripture readings was "Yikes!"

I hope you don't come to worship to get a warm, fuzzy feeling. I hope you didn't come to worship this Sunday to hear a word of comfort and peace from scripture. Because it's not here. I really struggled this week to find something that we could use for prayer group.

Because what do we have? In our Old Testament reading, from the words of the prophet, Amos, we have the admonitions, "Seek the LORD and live" (Amos 5:6a), "seek good and not evil" (Amos 5:14a), and "hate evil and love good" (Amos 5:15a) but we have it in the context of the judgment of the people in the context of warning. Seek the LORD and live---or else!

Here is the judgment that the prophet speaks against the Northern kingdom of Israel.

They hate justice and turn it to bitterness and corruption. (Amos 5:7)

They hate the one who offers justice in the city gate and hate the ones who speak the truth. (Amos 5:10)

They trample on the poor and "take from them levies of grain" (Amos 5:11).

They afflict the righteous, they take bribes, they push aside the needy in the gate. (Amos 5:12)

Therefore, this is the “or else”, this is the consequence, this is what is coming for them, the results of their evil deeds:

The Lord will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and that fire will devour Bethel, the capitol city of the Northern Kingdom, with no one to quench it. (Amos 5:6)

They will build nice, sturdy houses, but they will not live in them. (Amos 5:11b)

They will plant pleasant vineyards, but shall not drink the wine of them. (Amos 5:11c)

There’s nothing warm and fuzzy about that.

The only comforting thing about it is that the people are warned, they are told to mend their ways, to turn things around, and find God’s mercy in that transformation. This is how our reading for Amos concludes, the only thing close to comfort in the whole reading,

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15)

The prophet does not give surety, but hope. It may be that the LORD, the God of hosts will be gracious.

I often choose the Psalm or a portion of the Psalm for prayer group. But this week, the Psalm is a plea rather than a comfort. The Psalmist pleads with God to be merciful.

Return, O Lord; how long will you tarry?

Be gracious to your servants.

Satisfy us by your steadfast love in the morning;

so shall we rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you afflicted us

and as many years as we suffered adversity. (Psalm 90:13-15)

The second reading, from Hebrews, is not much better, with its living and active word of God, sharper than a two-edged sword.

And then, of course, we have the gospel reading, which is always a challenging one. It's the story of Jesus' encounter with a rich young man, who wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Instead of just answering him, Jesus gives him a quick catechism class.

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' (Mark 10:18-19)

And then the rich young man tells him, "I have kept all these since my youth."
(Mark 10:20)

So, Jesus tells him the one other thing that he needs to do, in order to inherit eternal life. He tells him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the

money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”
(Mark 10:21)

And then, the text tells us that when he heard Jesus’ words, the rich young man “was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” (Mark 10:22)

And so am I, shocked and grieving, for I too, with my overwhelming closets and cupboards and basement and bookshelves, have many possessions.

But here’s why I don’t go away, like the rich young man in our gospel reading, or when I hear the rest of the gospel reading for today where Jesus says,

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23)

“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:24-25)

These are hard words for me to hear. I, who am burdened, I who am overwhelmed by my possessions, and perhaps they are hard words for some of you too. I’m sure that few if any of us consider ourselves to be materially rich, but I’m also sure that most of us would acknowledge our abundance of possessions, many of which bring us joy and help us to function in our lives, but some of which overwhelm us and ensnare us.

So, here’s why, upon hearing these words of Jesus, I don’t just give up or go away. Because this is what the text tells us, before Jesus gives his hard teaching on possessions and wealth and the kingdom of God. It tells us that Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him. (Mark 10:21) And then he told him what he needed to be set free, to be liberated by the gospel, to be healed from what was suffocating

his life. Jesus message to him wasn't one of judgment or criticism. It was one of love. It was the prescription for what sickened and overwhelmed the life of the young man. It was given in love.

And I think we should hear all of the words that sound like judgment in today's readings, like that, as words of love instead of words of judgment. I think we should hear them as prescriptions from the God who loves us for our healing and for the healing of the communities in which we live.

Do we want to live? Seek life, seek goodness, seek justice, seek truth, act with generosity, show kindness to the needy, do not let your possessions bind you.

That is the life that our God who loves us wants us to have, a life that is good for us, healthy, freeing, and good for our communities too. Lives where our time and our imaginations, and our energy is not consumed by getting more and more for ourselves while those around us have less and less.

Tomorrow, maybe even later on today, I will spend some more time with my closets and cupboards and shelves and basement, trying to disentangle myself from the burden of my possessions. But I will also keep in mind that for my healing, for our healing, for life, Jesus, who looks at us and loves us does not just want our leftovers. Jesus invites us to be free, to see the needs around us, and to give generously of what we have.

For the eternal life, the eternal freedom that Jesus wants for us, starts now, and in order to have life, eternal life, and have it abundantly, Jesus tells us to turn away from a world that tells us that the meaning of life is more, more, more, and that teaches us to fear that we will never have enough, and shows us the way to a life of following the God who looks at us and loves us, and invites us to be generous and free. Thanks be to God. Amen.