

Amos 8: 4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16: 10-13

Allegiance and Congruence
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That great English theologian, Spike Milligan, once said: “Money can't buy you happiness. But it does bring you a more pleasant form of misery.” And so, of course, since we prefer the more pleasant forms of misery, we try to accumulate enough money, or enough possessions, to keep ourselves comfortable. This is reasonable; this is common sense.

But, the accumulation of money is not that simple, and our Scriptures tell us that it has **never** been that simple. Some people are not able to attain even a pleasant misery, while others have overflowing bank accounts and lives of luxury. This past week, Forbes Magazine published the names of the 400 wealthiest Americans. Though many see the last few years as a time of financial hardship, this article gives another perspective. The total worth of these 400 people is a record \$2.02 trillion, which is about the size of the GDP of Russia. This total is a gain of \$300 billion from a year ago, and it is double of 2003's total. The bar to get on this list of the 400 is now so high that 61 American billionaires did not make the cut. Meanwhile, according to some, the middle class is shrinking, and many families have dropped below the poverty line. The old catchphrase, “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer,” seems to be in play this year.

But I am not going to get into a discussion of capitalism or the free market economy or anything like it. I am turning instead to the religious response to inequity. The prophet Amos, who lived more than 700 years before the time of Jesus, had one kind of religious response, and it was - anger. The book of his sayings are one long rant against the kingdom of Israel. He was an outsider, coming up from his farm in the southern kingdom of Judah and visiting the urban centers of Bethel and Samaria. He looked around at the luxurious homes of the rich. He looked around at the hovels of the poor. He listened to marketplace conversations. And he was horrified. Here was a people who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had been given a moral compass by the events at Sinai, and yet...their day-to-day lives were light years away from that spiritual source. They worshipped in the temples and they went through the rituals. But Amos reports their interior monologue: “I can't wait until this new moon festival is over, so I can get back to business. I can't wait for the Sabbath to be over: I am missing a whole day in the market.” Amos notices their sharp business practices: undersized bushels, large fees, inferior products. And Amos says, “God sees too, and God remembers.”

The message of this prophet, and of so many prophets, was: your professions and protestations of faith and your weekday lives are not congruent. These two parts of your life have flown off in completely separate directions. This is not sustainable. The way you treat the poor and needy has spiritual consequences. If you profess allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses' God, the one true God, then your lives outside of the worship space must reflect this.

Speaking of the one true God: I remember a confirmation class, years ago, when the subject of monotheism came up – as it would, you would hope, at some point in a confirmation class. We

are so used to the dominance of monotheistic religions in our Western world, that we sometimes assume that that it is a no-brainer, so to speak. But at least one, and I think two, of the confirmation class kids said, “You know, I don’t like the idea of just one God. I like what the Greeks had, with their pantheon of 12 or more gods and goddesses.” And so we went back to square one and talked about what it meant to worship one God. Somehow the discussion got on to the subject of divided loyalties, as opposed to a single-minded devotion. And that was a good discussion to have.

In some ways, positing an alternative god-like figure has its uses, as a way of illustrating allegiance and loyalties and congruence. Jesus does this in the teaching we read today. The translation I read says, “If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”...and “You cannot serve God and wealth.” The word “wealth” translates “Mammon.” Mammon is a sort of title for the idea, or the idol, or the god of money. Jesus lays it all out starkly: You can serve - or worship, or throw your lot in with - the one true God, or you can idolize wealth. And, in case you are wondering, a reciprocal relationship of trust is possible with God. It does not really work that way with money. Wealth does not offer us a depth of relationship. It’s just money. It has its uses, and it is certainly worth sharing – to offer our neighbors more pleasant forms of misery rather than abject poverty. But don’t give it your worship. It will isolate you from the deep spiritual riches that are freely offered elsewhere.

The early church also wrestled with questions of allegiance, and we can see this in the first letter to Timothy, written a couple of generations after Jesus’ time. In spite of the hopes and expectations of the apostles, Jesus had not returned. Life had to go on, people had to make money and eat and function somehow, but persecutions and trials were part of being Christian, and had been for years. The followers of Christ lived in a pagan empire, and it was perfectly clear who was in charge: who had the money, who had the troops, who had power of every kind. It was a perfect set up for resenting and demonizing the emperor and all his minions. It was a perfect set up for resenting those who held all the wealth, and who worshipped Mammon.

But the author of this letter, chooses another way, one that is more congruent with his understanding of the universe. He reminds the young pastor Timothy in Ephesus who was really in charge of everything. In spite of the appearance of overwhelming earthly power resting with the empire, in spite of the impulse to respond with abject fear or raging hate, there is one clarifying principle: there is only one God, there is such a thing as truth, and the mediator of that truth - Jesus Christ - can be trusted.

Allegiance to this God allows us to stop being afraid long enough to see a few things: that God desires “all” to feel the touch of grace; that “Christ Jesus, himself human, gave himself for all.” Therefore, congruence with loyalty to this God demands a certain kind of prayer, and the author urges “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions.” Before you think that this is just blind accommodation or a strategy of placid acceptance of injustice, remember that prayer does not imply approval. Instead, it might mean that prayer enables Christians to join in difficult efforts to speak truth to power. Our moral compass does not shift: it just widens our understanding of the scope of God’s power and mercy.

So, if we follow the advice given in this letter, not just the rulers ought to have our prayers, but everyone does. No one is worthless or beyond God’s reach. And so I wonder, I ask, how does it feel to pray for both the emperor and the persecuted Christian in the same breath? How does it feel

to pray for the billionaire and the hungry child in the same breath? How does our sense of injustice tolerate this juxtaposition?

And perhaps, to bring this in to even higher relief, how many of us are praying for the well-being of Assad after hearing of 100,000 deaths in Syria in the last two years? How many of us are praying for the men in Chicago who critically wounded a 3-year-old in random violence the other day? How many of us pray for the dishonest banker or the corrupt official?

The truth is, it is almost impossible for us to do this. And this is why I take the time to wrestle with our sacred Scriptures: to catch a glimpse of the God whose love can encompass the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the man of violence and the innocent child. I need the harsh, bracing words of Amos; I need the challenging quixotic words of Jesus, I need the voice of the early Christians who struggled to live out an illegal religion in an unjust system. These words inform my prayer and they inform my action. They flesh out the allegiance I offer God into something congruent with God's loving purpose in the world.

Yes, the impossible is being asked of us. Scripture asks us to bring a Sabbath awareness into our weekday living. Scripture asks us not to love Mammon quite so much, even though Mammon offers us much-needed physical comfort. Scripture asks us to pray for wicked rulers. It's impossible. It will only work if I throw in my lot with that quirky rabbi from first century Galilee: the one who asked the impossible and did the impossible. That's where I will invest my loyalty; that's where I will set my moral compass. And with the help of God, the example of Jesus, and the company of loving friends, I hope to find my way. Amen.