

25th Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C”
September 21-22, 2019

In praise of prudence.

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

“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 anyone in their lives. So, when Amos condemns cheating in the first reading, he is highlighting the importance of honesty. Yet, Jesus reminds us that if we are trustworthy in little things we will also be trustworthy in larger ones.

While there are some remarkable insights in this parable, there are also inherent difficulties in the parable that, if it caused you to scratch your head in confusion, I assure you, that you are not alone. The apparent incongruity of a story that praises a scoundrel has vexed biblical commentators for centuries. This parable was even cited by the last pagan Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate, (+ 363 A.D.) to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith.¹ The Church has had to answer the claim that evil is being rewarded.

The setting for today’s parable is that of a large estate in which the steward is entrusted with managing the business affairs of that estate. He reduces the debt without authorization.² At face value, an unjust steward is being praised for being clever. He forfeited all profit, both for himself and the owner, using the latitude given to himself in managing the estate.

The steward receives credit for having arranged such a good deal between the landowner and the renters. The renters would be very appreciative and indebted to the steward. The owner ends up looking really good. The steward hopes to gain favor of his own, knowing he is about to be dismissed. But this is not why he is praised in the parable.

¹ Bailey, K. E. 1983. *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Quoting Martin Scharlemann, *Parables*, p. 81, 1972 edition.

² If the renters thought that he was acting without the approval of the landowner, they would not have agreed; the risk would have been too great.

Jesus is not praising the steward's dishonesty, but rather his ability to use his own cleverness in order to obtain something far greater- his self-preservation.

While a high school Chaplain, I witnessed firsthand something similar. A high school senior was off campus, grabbing lunch at a sandwich shop near school. It was a closed campus, and unfortunately, he picked the same day that I happened to be there with another school administrator.

When I went to get a refill of my drink, he saw me, instantly realizing that he was toast. He came over somewhat sheepishly, and I awaited his explanation (and apology). Instead, he threw me for a loop, inquiring if he could go to confession! I smiled and replied: "Certainly, but of course Mr. Smith over there (pointing towards the administrator whom he did not see) is not bound by the seal of the confessional...but, nice try."

Obviously, this would have been a misuse of the Sacrament-to keep me quiet. At the same time, the young man understood quite well what I had taught about the seal of the confessional! Twenty-five years later, he is a faithful Catholic husband and father and guess what- he's 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 widow got what she wanted from the judge (Lk 18:1-9), how much more you and God? If the man received bread at midnight from his neighbor (Lk 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 even survive. Jesus is concerned here with something more critical than a financial crisis. His concern is that we avert spiritual crisis and personal disaster through the exercise of faith and foresight.

Prudence as a virtue can take many forms given a particular situation. As a cardinal virtue, it disposes our practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. As Thomas Aquinas wrote, of prudence, “it is right reason in action.”³

We are all faced with difficult situations in life, forced to make decisions that seemingly could go either way. With the help of prudence, we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about both the good we desire to achieve and the evil we must avoid.

Parents exhibit this virtue the most. They want to be actively involved in the faith life of their children, but as they grow older, they wonder to what degree they should be encouraging their children to make their own decisions. It is not always clear in each circumstance the answer to that question. Parents must balance the need to have their children interiorize their faith vs. commanding aspects of the practice of the faith under obedience.

I strongly suggest a daily prayer for prudence; ask God to help you discern the right course, that you may, in the words of Saint Paul, “lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity.”

³ Summa Theologica, II-II, Q. 47, art. 2