

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

LEADER: Turn our hearts to do justice in all we do.

ALL: May we work that all share the security, peace, and dignity that the prosperous take for granted.

LEADER: Nourish in us a love of truth and the practice of compassion.

ALL: Help us be as enterprising in seeking justice for all as we are in our own lives and work.

“The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ,” the bishops of Vatican II insist in their forward looking Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. This opening sentence called Catholics to invest in people who are poor and lack the basics of life—food, water, shelter, education, work, health care.

In fall 2015, the United Nations committed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The goals aim to end poverty, end hunger, ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, ensure education for all and end inequality in educational opportunities, end violence against women and human trafficking, ensure access to safe water and sanitation, stop climate change, protect Earth, and more.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



Image courtesy of Give Us Wings

In his teaching letter on ecology, *Laudato Si'*, *Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis extends our Christian commitment beyond our human brothers and sisters to Earth itself, now in peril. “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (#217).

Pope Francis urges all of us to feel the threats people who are poor feel when their fields dry up or their fishing grounds can no longer feed them. “We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of

indifference” (#52). Sunday’s gospel challenges us to be as ingenious at investing in the poor as a wily manager, dishonest and dismissed.

Our global world encourages people to travel, meet people in need firsthand, and build connections and friendships. Mary Steiner, who entered the convent with me, cofounded with her daughter an organization called Give Us Wings. She writes, “*We partner with hardworking, suffering, beautiful people in Kenya and Uganda, mostly women, in small self-help groups as they find their individual paths out of the horror of poverty.*

“*When my daughter and I traveled to Africa for the first time, we expected to meet poverty—instead we met people like the Serena and Rosella.*

“Serena is a woman, mutilated with a rusty piece of tin as a child, so she would never know the pleasure of physical love. She had no choice for survival other than to marry and bear many children—in her case seven, five of whom she had to bury; her husband is now long dead. She reaches down to find her power, farms, and weaves mats to support her mother, two children, and two of her dead sister’s children.

“Rosella fled the violence in the North of Uganda. Her husband died on the way along with two of her children. She dug their graves with her own hands. Hiding in the bush, she and her remaining three children scavenged food from garbage and roots. They got thinner and sicker.

“One day Rosella stood in front of me at a Give Us Wings health camp. She and her children were at the same time bloated and scrawny. She stood looking at me with the hollow, hot eyes of infection and malnutrition, and said so quietly that I had to let the words sit in my brain to hear them, “I think we are dying.”

“We had the necessary medical things. Another family took Rosella into their home and then helped build her a little home.”

● **What goals most interest you in achieving?**

GOSPEL

Jesus gives us an embezzler as a model.



JESUS: A wealthy man had a business manager. He heard reports that the manager was embezzling, so he called the manager in.

RICH MAN: What’s this I hear about you? Give me your account books and get out—you’re fired!

JESUS: The business manager thought this over to himself.

MANAGER: What will I do now that I’ve been dismissed? I’m not strong enough to dig for a living, and I’d be ashamed to live on handouts. I’ve got it—I know what to do so I’ll have people to take me in.

JESUS: Summoning his boss’s debtors one by one, he asked them the same question.

MANAGER: How much do you owe my boss?

DEBTOR 1: A hundred gallons of olive oil.

MANAGER: Here, take your promissory note and make it 50. Here, you—what do you owe?

DEBTOR 2: A hundred bushels of wheat.

MANAGER: Here’s your note. Quick, make it 80.

JESUS: The boss commended this dishonest manager for acting so shrewdly. You see, the children of this age are a lot shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light. So I tell you, take your ill-gotten wealth and make friends for yourselves so when your money runs out, you may be permanently welcome in their homes.

VOICE 1: Whoever is dependable in minor matters is also dependable in great matters; whoever is dishonest even with a little can hardly be trusted with a lot. If you can’t be trusted even with what you’ve gotten dishonestly, who will trust you with real wealth? If you’ve cheated with what belongs to someone else, who will trust you even with what is really your own?

VOICE 2: No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. Neither can you serve both God and wealth.

Luke 16.1-13

How can we use our money to make friends with the poor?

Strangely Jesus seems to make the gospel ponzi schemer into an inventive hero rather than a villain. The dishonest manager fits among the scammers in our news who line their pockets with other people’s money. Surely Jesus can’t mean

to commend the practice of an embezzler who compounds his crime by writing off debts owed his boss. We expect the boss to bring criminal charges against the crooked manager, not praise him. We miss the point of Jesus’ parable if we try to spiritualize



the manager's actions. Jesus is talking about his real world and ours.

Few of the people listening to Jesus would have missed his point. Farmers and small merchants would know perfectly well the kind of self-serving scoundrel Jesus' parable describes, and so would poor sharecroppers and migrant workers who had to sell their hard labor to unscrupulous brokers just to stay alive.

In order for the rich to get richer in Roman-occupied Judea, the poor got poorer. The manager in Jesus' story may well have thought he was doing nothing worse than anyone else in his social class. After all, the owner of the business still made a handsome profit; and the

manager could feel entitled to a little extra since he provided an indispensable service in expanding his boss's wealth.

The parable upends our usual way of looking at things when the boss praises the embezzler. The good the self-serving manager does is reducing the debts of the poor, carrying out what Catholic social teaching calls a preferential option for the poor.

The avaricious owner admires the manager's skillful exploitation of his accounts to create a future for himself. The owner makes little of having his profits plundered for the sake of the powerless. The parable stresses the manager's ingenuity.

This parable, which appears only in Luke's gospel, shifts

to the poor the prerogative of determining who will find a home in the messianic age. The poor are the ones with whom those with ill-gotten gains must make friends. The poor are the ones who will decide to take the rich in.

● **What do you think motivates the manager? Is he punishing his boss for firing him, helping the poor for his own gain, or modeling God's preference for helping the poor?**

Luke's gospel does not let the self-serving manager go without criticizing him. Luke follows the parable with a series of sayings that pass judgment on dishonest people. The sayings insist, whoever is dishonest with a little can't be trusted with a lot. No one can trust a cheater. No one can serve two masters.

This parable focuses on ethics for the small middle class of Jesus' time, those who deal with other people's money and execute other people's business. Luke is stressing Jesus' emphasis on helping poor people.

The safest investment, according to the parable, is to throw in our lot with the poor, to serve God rather than pursue wealth. When money becomes scarce, those who already know how to live on less will welcome us into their homes.

● **How do invest in people in need?**

For us today in a society with a large middle class, this parable is subversive. It works its way into our everyday lives where we expect the cheapest prices but the best

Image courtesy of Give Us Wings



A grinder for nuts and grains can grow into a small business.

products, where we expect corporations to benefit the poor and offer a living wage but stay competitive.

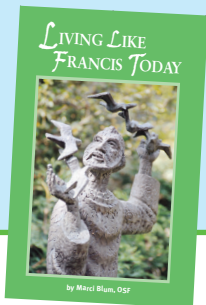
In the world of Sunday's parable as in our world, including the poor in the common economic good challenges us. Jesus' parable calls us to apply as much ingenuity in exploiting the economy for the sake of the poor as we ordinarily do to exploit the poor for the sake of the economy. And those of us who call ourselves Jesus' followers are called on to make that change.

● **What good things do you take for granted that are beyond the reach of poor people in your area or in the world?**

● **How do you benefit from the labor of poor people?**

● **What in your opinion most helps lift poor people out of poverty?**

The feast day of St. Francis is October 4. Explore Francis's practice of simplicity, generosity, prayer and more in *Living Like Francis Today*. Only \$5.50. Order at goodgroundpress.com or call 800-232-5533.



Amos indicts the complacent rich.

The prophet Amos brings a scathing indictment against the wealthy of ancient Israel. He speaks to them at the royal holy place, accusing them of hypocrisy—of observing a constricted form of religion, while scheming to wring more money out of their neighbors and crush the needy.

We probably see our relationship as First World consumers to Third World poor people no less complacently than the comfortable courtesans of Amos's time. Economists observe that in today's intricate global economy, the cup of coffee we enjoy in the morning comes with enormous human costs for harvesters in Guatemala, Colombia, or Rwanda. Our lives are intimately connected with the lives of the world's poor.

Read the following passage. Listen for the corrupt business practices it names.

Amos calls the rich to change.

Hear this, you that trample the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?

"We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

God has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Amos 8.4-7

● **What business practices are we uncomfortable with? How might we change our involvement in them?**

PRAY

Spend a few minutes in silent reflection on your discussion. Then come together using the following pattern.

LEADER: God of justice, show us the ways our economic practices hurt the poor.

Add your own petitions.

LEADER: God of compassion, keep our hearts from fatigue toward the misery of others.

Add your own petitions.

LEADER: God of wisdom, let our prayer fill our lives with the love of you and of our neighbors.

All: Amen.



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