

Unjust Stewards and Unrighteous Wealth: A Sermon on the Gospel According to Robin Hood

Amos 8:4-12

Psalm 138

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13



One of the most popular of traditional stories is the “Robin Hood” or “Cinderella” story. The story begins with a setting of injustice. There are a group of powerful and usually wealthy figures who are in charge – the “bad guys” – who are unfairly oppressing someone else – an individual or a group of people who are poor, powerless, and unable to defend themselves. In “Robin Hood,” the bad guys are Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. In Cinderella, they are the wicked stepmother and the ugly step sisters. In the midst of this injustice, a previously unknown, poor, and apparently powerless figure appears out of nowhere, but this figure surprises everyone by defeating and overcoming the powerful and wealthy villains, the poor are delivered, and everyone lives happily ever after. Robin Hood and Cinderella

play this figure in their versions of the story, but the story is still very much with us in contemporary culture. Orphaned teenagers Peter Parker and Harry Potter are Robin Hood and Cinderella respectively in our own day.

There are lots of ways to tell the biblical story, and the Robin Hood/Cinderella variation is one possible framework. Jacob's son Joseph is the youngest of twelve brothers, who is sold into slavery, but eventually rises to be Pharaoh's right-hand man, to deliver Egypt from famine, and to save his own family, including the brothers who had betrayed him. Jacob's descendants are slaves in Egypt, but they are delivered by Moses, himself the son of poor Israelites, who was pulled out of the Nile as a baby floating in a basket. In the New Testament, we are familiar with Mary's prayer, The Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:46-48, 52-53)

The Robin Hood story can provide a kind of common framework for making sense of this morning's lectionary readings. Turning to Amos, we find that the theme of the reading is the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. Amos is historically the first of the writing prophets, written between 760 and 740 BC. The book is a judgment on the sins of the nation of Israel, and, unlike later prophets, Amos's message is entirely negative. He offers no message of hope or forgiveness. Amos threatens that Israel will go into exile, and that is exactly what eventually happened.

In this morning's lectionary reading, Amos pronounces a message of judgment against the wealthy of the land, who are portrayed as the most unscrupulous of business tycoons. They trample on the needy and bring the poor to an end. They want the religious holidays to be over so that they can get back to

making money. They charge higher prices than they should, and pay less than is fair. They use falsified scales to cheat their customers, and they stretch their product by mixing it with filler. Finally, not only do they sell material goods, they also treat human beings as objects of profit. They buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. This is likely not referring to actual slavery, but to lending practices that got people into so much debt that they could never pay their way out. If the television show *Sixty Minutes* had existed in Amos's day, these would have been the people who found themselves being recorded with hidden cameras and microphones. In the Robin Hood story, these are the people who work for the Sheriff of Nottingham.

If the rich in Amos's prophecy are those who rob the poor, in the Psalm we actually hear the voice of the poor whom the rich are robbing. The Psalm contrasts the great and the lowly, and makes clear which of these groups has God on their side: "For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar." Although the situation is still dangerous, the Psalmist trusts in God's protection: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me." (Ps. 138:6) In the two Old Testament readings, the basic elements of the Robin Hood story are there: in Amos, we hear of the powerful wicked who oppress the poor and helpless; in the Psalm, the poor find their deliverance from an unexpected source, in this case, the Lord God himself plays the role of Robin Hood.

The gospel reading this morning is one of Jesus' most puzzling parables. Jesus tells the story of a man whose moral character is rather off-putting. The man first cheats his employer, and then compounds the injury by making arrangements with his employer's debtors to falsify their billing records. The employer responds not by losing his temper – which any normal employer would do – but by commending the steward for his

shrewdness.

No one in this story comes off well. The steward is a cheat, and Jesus refers to him as dishonest. But the debtors are no better. They go along with the fraud. And the employer himself commends the steward! It would seem that this was just the kind of behavior he himself would practice if he had thought of it. In the Old Testament lectionary readings, it is rather simple to identify the good guys and the bad guys, but it seems that all the players in this parable are bad guys. This is a parable about bad guys cheating bad guys!

So we are really quite surprised when Jesus concludes the story with this bit of advice: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:9) What is going on? Certainly Jesus is not recommending that we imitate the behavior of a man he had described as "dishonest"? That cannot be the case because Jesus goes on to say, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much" and "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:10, 13) The unrighteous steward would be a prime example of someone who tried to serve two masters and failed.

What then does Jesus mean when he recommends that we "make friends by unrighteous wealth"? There is perhaps a clue in the preceding sentence: "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." (v. 8) Jesus seems to be praising not the steward's dishonesty, but his industriousness and resourcefulness in using the tools he had available to him.

A standard exegetical principle is that clear passages should be consulted to make sense of unclear passages. It might help

to make sense of the parable by putting it into the context of the "Robin Hood" story echoed in another New Testament passage – Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. In this parable about the eschatological judgment, the Son of Man divides the sheep from the goats. The king tells the sheep that they are blessed and will inherit the kingdom because "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." When the sheep do not remember having done this, the Master replies "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Conversely, the goats are told to depart into judgment because when they failed to provide food and water to the hungry and thirsty, failed to clothe the naked, or failed to visit the sick in prison, they had failed to do it to the king. The righteous sheep enter eternal life, while the goats face eternal judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

Here we see a New Testament variation on the Robin Hood story. This time the contrast is not between the wealthy oppressors and the poor they oppress, but between those who act to help the poor, and those who, by failing to help, align themselves with the unrighteous rather than with the King. Who are the sheep? If Jesus is Robin Hood, the sheep are his merry band. How do the followers of Jesus use the mammon of unrighteousness? By feeding the hungry, by visiting those in prison.

If this were the whole of the New Testament story, we could end here, with the contrast between rich and poor, oppressors and oppressed. The gospel is good news for the poor, but bad news for wealthy oppressors. In the words of Luke's version of Jesus' sermon on the plain: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for

you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25)

But that is not where the story ends. It is not that we do not find the Robin Hood story in the gospels, but that the gospels tell the Robin Hood story with a twist. We see that twist in the epistle reading this morning. The apostle writes: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2:1-4) Paul asks his readers to pray for all people, especially for “kings and all who are in high positions.”

Would not these kings and all who are in high positions be the same people whom the prophet Amos condemns as the wealthy who sell the poor for a pair of sandals? Does not the apostle James say of these people, “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?” (James 2:6) And the apostle Paul reminds his listeners, “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” (1 Cor. 1:26)

Yes, kings and those in high places would likely be among the oppressors. Yet the apostle asks us to pray for these people, and his motivation is that “God our Savior . . . desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” The gospel is not just good news for the poor and the oppressed; it is also good news for the rich and the oppressor.

Paul provides the reason why the gospel can be good news even for oppressors in the next verse: “For there is one God, and

there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time." (1 Tim. 2:5-6) As the mediator between God and humanity, the incarnate Jesus Christ is the rich king who has come in disguise to save the beggar. The apostle Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus pointed out that even foxes have holes and birds have nests, but as a poor man, he himself had no place to lay his head (Luke 9:59). Jesus died at the hands of the rich and powerful. He was the poor beggar who was bought not for a pair of sandals, but sold for thirty pieces of silver. Nailed to the cross on which he bled out his life, Jesus took on the place of the Psalmist, but rather than praying for deliverance from his enemies, he prayed for their forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

And here is where the New Testament version of the Robin Hood story has a twist. In Jesus' earthly mission, he was the poor man who ate with the poor and the dispossessed, but he scandalized his fellow Jews because he also ate with the tax collectors who had dispossessed them (Matt. 9:11). Jesus looked on the rich young man who asked him what he must do to earn eternal life, and he loved him, but the man turned away because he was not willing to part with the wealth that prevented him from following Jesus (Mark 10:1-31; Luke 8:18-30). However, Jesus also loved the tax collector Zacchaeus, who went to eat in Zacchaeus's home, and Zacchaeus repented, promising to give half of his goods to the poor, and repay back four times anyone he had defrauded (Luke 19:1-10). In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus told the story of another rich young man who loses all he possesses, and only when he is absolutely desperate, returns empty-handed to his father, and the father greets him with open arms (Luke 15:11-32). The gospel story is a retelling of the Robin Hood

story with a twist. The gospel is good news for the poor, but it is also good news for the rich oppressor who comes recognize that he or she is also poor.

This modified Robin Hood or Cinderella story has implications for how we ourselves understand the gospel. The gospel is about salvation from sin, but it is also a story about good news to the poor. The modern divide between conservative Evangelicals who focus on evangelism and liberal Protestants who focus on social justice is a false dichotomy. To preach the gospel means to evangelize, but it also means to care for the least of these, for refugees, for immigrants, for minorities, for the homeless.

If the gospel story is good news for the poor, it is also good news for the oppressor, because, in the end, we are all poor, and we all must return to our Father with empty hands. The gospel tells us to love the unrighteous – to forgive our enemies as Jesus did, to recognize that even those who persecute us, those who sell the poor for a pair of sandals, are also those for whom Jesus Christ died.

Finally, the gospel as a modified Robin Hood story says something about what we do with money. Jesus concluded the parable of the unjust steward: “No servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money.” (Luke 16:13) To serve mammon means that we care for own own security first. Since there is not enough to go around, we hoard what we have and bury it in the ground (Matt. 25:14-30). The unjust steward did what he did because he was insecure. He was fearful that he would have nothing to live on when the money ran out, and so he became a cheat. Our case is different. The good news of the gospel is that there is more than enough to go around. Because the God who is our Father has given us the gift of his own Son, we can be confident that our Father will give us everything else we need as well. In the words of the apostle Paul, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15) “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us

all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32)

Jesus reminds us that our Father has numbered the very hairs of our heads. God cares for sparrows, and we are worth more than sparrows (Matt. 10:31; Luke 12:7). We do not need to worry about security then. We can care for the least of these because God will care for us. We have Jesus' own promise: "But rather seek the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:31-32)