

Are Both Hands Open?

Lord may the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be acceptable in your sight. AMEN

In our first reading we enter the world of Amos during the 8th century BCE. Amos came from Tekoa, a town about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. According to bible scholars, Tekoa was noted for its cultivation of country common sense which engendered a folk wisdom that we see in the book of Proverbs.

Amos is described as a sheep breeder which was someone who owned or managed large flocks of sheep. He would have been considered a relatively wealthy man. In places of worship he would have heard both the hymns of praise and the cries of lament. He would have known what went on behind the counters in the shops of the merchants and would have encountered the poor.

Amos prophesied for about two years during the time of Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam king of Israel. This was a time of comparative calm. Yet storm clouds were gathering. In a few years, Israel's current security and wealth would be over as a succession of great empires would dominate Israel's part of the world.

In the second verse of Chapter 1, the first proclamation from Amos sets the tone for the entire book. He states, "The Lord roars from Zion, Shouts aloud from Jerusalem!" As a shepherd, Amos would have known that a lion's roar evokes terror. The book of Kings contains a story about a prophet devoured by a lion as he was traveling on the road from Bethel to Judah. Amos may have journeyed on this very same road during his lifetime. In this imagery, Amos was setting the stage for God to be perceived in the form of a lion who would devour those that trampled on the needy.

Our first reading today focuses on grasping merchants who are doing just that. Amos talks about them in terms of their destroying the poor of the land. As one commentary states, the merchants Amos addressed had divided their lives into two compartments, one marked religion, the other marked prosperous business.

The merchants were conscientious in closing down for the holy days and observing services. Yet, during the rest of the week their religious practices were not a part of their business practices. The measure with which the corrupt merchants sold grain was smaller than it should be, allowing them to sell less for the full price. The weight with which they bought grain was larger than it should be, allowing them to get more than they should. Therefore, the customers who entered their places of business were doubly cheated, in both the buying and the selling.

These merchants had one hand opened to praising God during the holy days. But the other hand was clenched closed - probably with a coin in it! The prophet Amos was proclaiming that religion should have been a part of the merchant's whole life, not just on holy days, and in holy places, but every day and in every place. And wasn't their greed on all other days probably preventing them from finding spiritual refreshment on the holy days?

Moving into today's gospel from Luke; we encounter a parable that centers on the single-mindedness of a grasping manager. The rich man in this parable is probably an absentee landlord who entrusted the transaction of all usual business of his estate to a manager. This manager would have probably been a trained, trusted, and duly empowered agent of the landlord who was able to act in his name for transactions with third parties.

The landowner had gotten wise to his manager's mishandling of funds. Upon confrontation, the manager does not seek forgiveness or choose to move away from his love of wealth. Instead he deviously comes up with a method to cover his future by discounting the landowner's income and, therefore, buying for himself a way to continue his wicked ways.

Amazingly, the cleverness of the manager is commended by the landowner! Yet, what he applauds is not the manager's crime but the consistency and initiative with which the manager rescues his own monetary existence.

In addition, we expect Jesus to call out the manager's actions as morally appalling and the landowner's commendation as unacceptable. Instead, Jesus says that "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

In this context, we envision that the focal point of the parable is on the manager's striving, no matter what the cost, to live a life cushioned by wealth. He has both hands firmly clenched around money. The manager is so successful in all of his efforts because of his intense focus on risking everything to keep earthly wealth.

Within his saying, Jesus is calling those who profess to center on the Lord to totally focus *their* energies - their whole will, their strength, and their very life in his service with open hands. The *children of light* cannot serve "halfway" but must risk *everything* in following the Lord.

So how can we apply our readings to the here and now? One of our guides for the answer might be found in Henri Nouwen's book, *With Open Hands*. In it he states that praying is living. It is not simply some necessary compartment in the daily schedule of a Christian or a source of support in time of need, nor is it restricted to Sunday mornings or mealtimes. It is a part of all of our actions and works of charity.

Praying encompasses every aspect of our lives. It is the unceasing recognition that God is wherever we are, always inviting us to come closer and to celebrate the divine gift of being alive. We find this prayerful relationship when we open both of our hands up to the Lord.

It can be frightening to open clenched hands. What will happen when there is nothing left to hold onto? Yet, when we approach God with open hands, what we *own* no longer becomes important because what we *receive* is the unconditional, everlasting love of the Lord. AMEN.