

25th Sunday, 07

1. A writer by the name of Dick Folger tells us that Mark Twain once had a lively discussion with a Mormon who was defending the practice of polygamy. The Mormon asked him: “Can you give me a passage from the Bible which forbids polygamy?” Twain said sure and cited the last line of today’s Gospel: “No man can serve two masters.”

2. So that is clear. But there are other parts of today’s Gospel which are not so clear. The scripture scholar Daniel Harrington tells us that today’s Gospel contains four different units which probably stood alone originally but were then joined together in this Gospel because they all referred in one way or another to the topic of money. All of them in one way or another give us the same message, namely, that what we do with our money concerns who we are before God. We cannot separate money and spirituality. They go together.

3. The first unit of the four is the longest one and is a story about an unjust manager of another man’s wealth. The employer finds out that his manager has mismanaged his money and tells him he is going to fire him. So what does this desperate manager do? He contacts people who owe his employer money and reduces their

debts to him. By doing so he hopes that they will return the favor, maybe by giving him a new job. If they don't, he could blackmail them by reporting them to his former employer as being involved in his own cheating game.

4. But what is the point of this parable? It is that people in business are very clever when it comes to protecting their own interests, indeed much more so than most of us are when it comes to our own lives as believers, as people who will have to answer to God for the way we have lived our lives, for the way we have used the gifts God has given us, even for the way we have used our money.

5. The second unit of our Gospel therefore urges us to use our wealth in such a way that it will make friends for us both here and hereafter. The third unity tells us that normally there is a correlation, an agreement, between the way people use their material possessions and the way they handle their spiritual lives. Or we could put it in the more familiar way: a person who is trustworthy in little, less important things will also be trustworthy in more serious matters.

6. In our first reading today the prophet Amos, who lived in the 700s BC, looked around and saw how people cheated each other in business matters. They used false coins. They could not wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they could get back to their crooked business deals. They had no concern for those they swindled. The poor among them, especially slaves, they would trade for a pair of sandals. So here we have the other side, the exact opposite of the Gospel's message. Here are those who do not make their business lives conform to their faith lives. Here are those who do not try to use their wealth in such a way that it will benefit them on the day of final judgment before God.

7. How does this all apply to us? I suppose we have to make sure that we are honest in our business dealings with others. Many Americans, it seems, live beyond their means. Someone else has to pay their bills. That does not seem right. Of course we all agree that the poor have the right to food, even if they have to steal it. Patricia Sanchez, the commentator on scripture in the Celebration series, tells the story of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of NYC from 1934-1945. As mayor he could act as a judge. One night a poor man who had stolen a loaf of bread was brought before him. The shopkeeper wanted him punished. La Guardia fined him \$10 and then paid the fine himself. Then he fined

everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a person had to steal in order to eat. The man on trial received \$47.50 from the collection, 50 cents of it from the now red-faced shopkeeper who had had him brought to trial. All present gave the mayor a standing ovation.

8. Make friends with our money, friends here and God as our ultimate friend. Let us be honest. If we are working, we must do an honest day's work. If we are retired and have very little to live on, we may not feel this Gospel has much to say to us. If we have a little left over after paying our bills—for that has to be done first-- then we can look to see how we spend our money, for that will reveal to us what we think is worth spending on. As someone said recently, "You can look at your check book to see what your priorities in life are."

9. With respect to us as a parish, there might also be questions. It would seem that much of our money goes for the maintenance of our church and rectory. Is that right? I think it is. We should care for them as well as we can. After all, they are our inheritance from those who built them with their money. But we should also spend on the education of our children and ourselves in the faith. Let us ask God for guidance in our stewardship of our parish.