



“THE GOOD PROVIDER”
SCRIPTURE: AMOS 6:1A, 4-7; LUKE 16:19-31
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 29, 2019
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Amos 6:1a, 4-7

6:1a Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.

6:4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;

6:5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music;

6:6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

6:7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Luke 16:19-31 (youth)

16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

16:20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

16:21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

16:22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

16:23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

16:24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip

the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.'

16:25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'

16:26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

16:27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house--

16:28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

16:29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

16:30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

16:31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

“The Lord will provide.” What do those words mean to you?

Do you believe that God is “The Good Provider”?

If we truly believe in God’s power and dependability to provide, then we can’t be afraid to hear the hard words from scripture today. But we can’t just hear them, we have to learn how to heed them—and that, my friends, is a task human societies have failed at again and again. And we, as citizens of planet earth, find ourselves in the midst of a historical unfolding that may well be the most epoch failure of faith that the world has ever seen.

There are literally hundreds of passages in the Bible about economic justice—about alleviating poverty, about interrogating wealth, about the profound challenges of navigating having wealth and being faithful. In fact there really isn’t anything God or Jesus has more to say about in the Bible.

It's a troubling reality that in our capitalist culture, the Bible is more often deployed to condemn things it never talks about (e.g. same sex marriage), instead of being deployed for what most of it is about—economic justice.

It's really not a message we can avoid—you might get mad at the messenger, but none of your pastors wrote the Bible—we're just called to preach from it prayerfully and courageously.

We didn't write the lectionary either. The group of people who decide on what passages preachers are invited to preach on each Sunday is called The Consultation on Common Texts—it includes representatives from over 20 denominations that decide on daily and weekly texts to be read across the church universal in three-year cycles.

That group of people must have a lot of confidence in us preacher types to give us Amos and then the parable in Luke of the rich man and Lazarus on the Sunday that pretty much every church in America is kicking off their stewardship campaigns.

I was actually feeling kind of sorry for myself earlier this week while doing research for this sermon. It felt like a cruel trick to have to preach on these texts on Stewardship Kick Off. How could it possibly inspire people to hear these harsh texts?

Then I put my defenses down and let these scripture speak to me, in my life.

These passages pushed me to do some reflecting on my own relationship to money. When my family decided to come to Asheville for me to serve this church, we cut our income almost to 1/5 of what we had been making. We got rid of over ½ of our furniture, sold our dream farm and our beloved beach house. I will not lie—it was hard. And sometimes I still miss the life we had.

But when I turned my pledge card in on Friday I reflected on how my relationship to money has changed since I came here. These passages helped me realize that my life is in the midst of a transformation that is still underway. I am learning to trust more and more that God really does provide—and that we are all being called to look at the way we live and the impact it has on a larger world.

I have changed. We have changed. And we are called to keep moving through God's amazing and mysterious call to be transformed in our self-understanding and in our way of life.

That's what "This Eucharistic Life" is all about—being transformed. So, let us with courage explore what God's word is calling us to see and to be.

Amos was the first ever documented prophet to disturb the economic disparities of Israel's way of life. He doesn't offer a lot of encouragement to his culture and its excesses. In fact, he doesn't even talk about repentance much at all. His focus is mostly on the changes that are already in motion—he says your comfortable, excessive, consuming ways of life are coming to an end. And those of you enjoying your excess will be the first in exile. Amos is the first to bring up exile, too.

Amos paints a picture of luxury and conspicuous consumption. The bowls they drink from are supposed to be used for cultic rituals. Instead they are using them to get drunk. There were actually religious institutions during that time that were especially for the wealthy. They had many buildings, and vineyards and other assets. Their chief purpose was to gather for huge feasts that would last for days. They refused to engage in serious questions and they had strayed far from the social justice teachings of the Torah.

In other words, Amos is the most passionate about the fact that excess and complacency were leading people down a road of destruction. In all your perceived gain, you are losing something that is the most precious of all—your trust in God and your freedom to love God courageously through the way you live your life.

The Rich Man and Lazarus tell a similar tale, at the same time it turns upside down common perceptions of the time about financial abundance. The rich man had it all—and he lost himself in it. He forgot his connection, his interdependence, his entanglement with the Lazarus' of his community. Even right outside the gate of his house, he let a man die, hungry, sick, alone—while he consumed and hoarded and lived as if the way he lived had no impact on the way anyone else was living. He knew Lazarus, and even in death he thought Lazarus was there to serve him, to make his life less uncomfortable.

The parable is a hard look at consequences. During that time in Middle Eastern culture, it was a common perception that if you were wealthy in this life it was a sign of God's favor. And if you were poor in this life it was a sign of God's judgment. And that the afterlife would flow out of that moral calculus—the rich would be blessed and the poor would be damned.

Jesus flipped that script with a jolt throughout his ministry. In fact, Jesus said, God is near to the brokenhearted and the marginalized. And those who enjoy financial abundance have some particular dangers they have to deal with because of their wealth. Jesus says in no uncertain terms that with wealth comes a considerable spiritual challenge that one must not be afraid to face in this life.

It's not having money that is the problem, it's our relationship to having money that can get us into trouble.

If having a lot for ourselves is worth the misery and death of others, the Bible is crystal clear—we've got a problem. If having wealth sequesters us from the realities of suffering and injustice in the world, then we've got a problem. If wealth waters down our commitment to equity and economic justice, then we've got a problem.

And that kind of relationship to wealth is a problem not just for individuals, but also for the cultures and systems those attitudes about money generate and authorize.

But even if we want to believe, “the Lord will provide.” It's hard to deny that money makes the world go round. As people of faith, we are required to take a hard look at how deeply money shapes human life, and how that distorts God's purpose for our lives and our communities.

“The Good Provider Is One Who Leaves. One Family and Migration in the 21st Century” by Jason DeParle is the story of a whole country built on the export of human beings. It's the story of a family, dispersed across the globe to provide, to survive.

Reporter DeParle, went to the Philippines in the 1980s to report on what life was like in the shantytowns of that country. That's where he met Tita, a mother, a matriarch, a provider. For thirty years, DeParle's relationship with three generations of Tita's family generates the story of global migration that defines his new book.

The story takes us beyond the news of mass migration and detention centers on the borders to the overwhelming realities of the movement of human bodies around the globe because of economic forces. The truth is the global markets of today don't just include goods and services, but those markets include human bodies—workers required to make our contemporary economy go and grow.

These migration patterns include both legal and illegal movement across borders. Survival is a planetary phenomenon—the realities of it often hiding in plain sight in our American context.

Tita's daughter, Rosalie, a nurse *“travels from Manila to Riyadh and Dubai, eventually landing a job at a hospital in Galveston, Tex. Like millions of other workers, she is wanted by her host countries, if not always welcome.”*

The World Health Organization reports that 258 Million people live outside their native countries.¹ This number has increased by 50% in the last two decades.

Providing for your family in a world economy that has commodified human bodies rips and tears at communities, families, and the well being of workers.

“The good provider is one who leaves,” Rosalie’s aunt said.

The history of the Philippines brings into clear relief the realities of economic engines and the commodification of human beings. The Philippines was formerly a Spanish colony, then a United States territory. In the 1960s the project to make the people of the Philippines the country’s main export was in full swing under the leadership of Ferdinand Marcos.

The World Bank reports that the Philippines (a tiny country) is the “third-highest recipient” of remittances from family members earning a living abroad behind only the two most populated countries in the world, China and India.

While documented immigrants like Rosalie have more freedom of movement than undocumented workers, losing sight of all the ways human bodies carry the weight of our global economies is a grave miscalculation for people of faith. How do we come to terms with the dehumanization of labor that has and continues to define the economics of our country and our planet?

Amos’ words reverberate today. When the excessive comfort of some comes on the backs of the discomfort and disadvantage of others, we ignore that reality at our own peril.

Luke’s disturbing parable reverberates today. Wealth can tempt us to act as if the suffering of the world is not our concern. Accumulation and deprivation are connected—God calls us to occupy that truth boldly, honestly, generously, courageously.

If money makes the world go round, how can faith interrupt the cycles that have us all caught? Do we have the eyes to see all the snares of the way of life we lead?

“What are you doing to a man when you call him a good provider?”²

That’s just one of the questions Mark Greene asks as a part of “The Good Men Project”—a project with the tagline: “the conversation no one else is having.”

Greene explores the way masculinity is constructed in American culture and the way that impacts men and boys. His core message is that the rigidity of normative masculinity is harmful to men and boys and to the larger culture. He describes what he calls “the man box” that men are put in. And one of the most prominent features of “the man box” is that men are the good providers, that men’s understanding of their own worth is directly connected to their breadwinning for their families.

We can point to many disruptions of the gendering of who the provider is in family systems, but even so, Greene asserts that the expectation of being the provider is

still embedded it what it means to “do manhood right” and that such pressure and expectation takes men away from their families into a world where they are encouraged to be stoic, tough, unemotional, and productive, but not nurturing, emotionally expressive, or affectionate.

The cost of human bodies becoming commodities is one that exempts no one from its diminishing returns. Even those who’s social position is the most privileged in an economic system are diminished in their ability to truly thrive as human beings. We all lose when our humanity becomes consumed by the economies that dictate what we must do to provide.

Faith calls us into the heart and soul of human community—our worth and identity come from God, not from money or our calculated worth in a commodified world.

So we’ve made it through Amos, and Luke’s painful parable, and we’ve opened ourselves up to the diminishing returns of the commodification of human beings.

Take a deep breath! It’s a lot to take in—and if you hear anything less than a profound challenge to the way labor and work and consumption and wealth function in the United States, then you may have dozed off for a few minutes.

Suffice it to say, the Lord is providing us with a remarkable healing opportunity, Grace Covenant. The Gospel calls us to interrogate ourselves, to look in the mirror—what is our relationship to money, and how do our ways of living impact our community and our world.

This community of faith is a place of undeniable abundance—God has brought us into a wide-open space of possibility and asks us to believe in something we can’t totally see or understand yet, and God is calling us to trust what is happening here in this community and to invest our lives in it with courage. God is calling us together to a new integrity, to a new capacity to be creators of justice and of joy.

Life Abundant! is our 2020 Stewardship Campaign. And the Stewardship Committee, the Finance Council, and the Session are inviting this community to take a bold step of sustainability and honesty about who God is calling us to be and how God is calling us to invest in the layers of healing work that are happening around us every day.

Life Abundant! is an opportunity to flip the script of a commodified, consumptive culture into a blue print for becoming a truly just and beloved community.

Abundance is not an invitation to excess, but an invitation to be transformed. If money doesn’t confine us, or define us, consider the possibility that money can be an

instrument of God's power to free us and to heal us, to free and to heal a world that is in a mighty struggle for its own soul.

Together we can trust in God, the Good Provider, to show us the way.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/books/review/a-good-provider-is-one-who-leaves-jason-deparle.html>

² <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/megasahd-what-are-you-doing-to-a-man-when-you-call-him-a-good-provider/>