

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost ≅ Year C
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
September 30, 2007

Scriptures that Make Me Squirm

Lessons for the Day

- ✘ Amos 6:1-7
- ✘ Psalm 146:1-9 (4-9)
- ✘ 1 Timothy 6:11-19
- ✘ Luke 16:19-31

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve God and Christ by our care for one another. Let's be silent for a moment as we seek to be present to God -- God who is always and every-where present to us in love and in healing. **Amen.**

Some of the lessons appointed for today make me squirm -- and I wonder if any of you felt the same way as they fell upon your ears and your hearts in the reading to the congregation.

Oh, the **Psalm was benign enough** -- **who** among us **can argue with a God** -- like Yahweh -- **who**:

- **executes justice for the oppressed,**
- **who gives food to the hungry, and**
- **who sets the prisoner free?**

Who can dispute the gracious mercy of the Lord when the Lord:

- **opens the eyes** of the blind,
- **lifts up** those who are bowed down,
- **watches over** the stranger, and
- **upholds** the orphan and the widow?

Indeed, **I am all for actions where God moves out in power to care for the defenseless among us.** There have been many times, in fact, when I have experienced God's grace and mercy in just these ways. **But still I am uneasy . . .**

Verse three of Psalm 146 -- a verse appointed for today, but not included in the readings we did aloud -- **enjoins us, "Do not put your trust in mortals, in whom there is no help."** And I wonder: How often have **I**, how often have **you**, how often have **we all** given over too much of our trust to ourselves or our leaders -- political or religious? And so I squirm . . .

And **then I read** -- as we just did in verse nine of Psalm 146 -- "**the way of the wicked brings to ruin.**" And I realize that I have (and we all have) **thrown in with a God who is** -- at the same time -- **both more gracious than I had any reason to expect, and more righteous than I can possible imagine.** And so I squirm yet again.

We move on to the **balance of our readings**, and **they remind me of a story** that seems appropriate here. A **Presbyterian preacher mounted the pulpit and gave a fiery sermon** about the ills of the community in which he served. He **inveighed against the evils of strong drink, gambling, and the sin of personal immorality.** He exhorted his congregation to **regular church attendance and to faithful service** of the Lord. And he **reached a crescendo when talking about money and giving, about the dangers of being comfortable, about sharing what you have and trusting only in the Lord's gracious provision for all your material needs.** Then the minister wrapped up his homily with a loud "Amen" and a Benediction. And he headed to the back of the church to greet his congregation.

What happened next is no surprise to Don or John or Tom, to Ginny or Fred or Julia or any of us who preach . . .

The **first person to greet him wore a strained look**, and the minister knew there was trouble. "**Preacher,**" he said, "**you started out pretty good in your sermon there. You were right on target about alcohol and about gambling and about infidelity.** And I agree with you about being in church every Sunday and about serving the Lord. All of that was **good preaching.** And **you should have quit while you were ahead.**"

"Because **there at the end** -- when you **started talking about money and about giving and sharing your wealth** -- **that's when you quit preaching and went to meddling!**" Sounds like this fellow was squirming right along with me . . . and perhaps with you as well.

In today's lesson from **Amos**, the Prophet wraps up a **multi-chapter indictment against the self-indulgent society of ancient Israel.** This is the same prophet Amos who, at the end of chapter five, (right before the verses appointed for today) gave us a powerful image of the Lord's desires:

"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos 5:24 (NRSV)

Today's lesson from Amos follows immediately on the heels of this oft-quoted verse, and **in today's lesson we hear hard words** about those "**who are at ease**" and those "**who feel secure**" and those who "**are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.**" And the Amos lesson makes me squirm, too, just like the verses from Psalm 146.

But **that's not the worst of it.** Our **lesson from Luke gives us the story of the rich man and Lazarus, with the rich man consigned to Hades while the Lazarus "is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham."** And again I squirm -- by now asking, "What is it with God and the money thing?" In the language of the twenty- and thirty-year-olds of today, it sounds like God "has issues" when it comes to money.

And then we get to 1 Timothy -- our epistle reading for today. This lesson -- among many other things -- enjoins us:

"As for **those who in the present age are rich**, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

1 Timothy 6:17 (NRSV)

And now it all comes into view. **I am squirming** -- as perhaps you are -- **because it sounds like God is anti-rich**. And -- arrayed against all of humankind in all of human history -- **you and I are very rich indeed**. We are **rich beyond the wildest imaginings** of many Americans. **Rich beyond anything that ninety percent of the world could fathom**. I squirm because I think God threatens my riches. Perhaps you squirm, too.

The truth of it, however, is that **God not only does not threaten our riches** -- God **is the source** of those riches. **God does not care if we are rich**. In fact, **God provided all our riches in the first place** -- or at least the gifts that allowed us to accumulate riches.

Hear me now -- **I am not preaching some prosperity theology run amok**. Some "name it and claim it" heresy that is an abomination before the Lord. No, I am preaching **God as the source of all good gifts**, and **God as deeply interested in our faithful use of those gifts**. And it is perhaps God's deep interest in what I do with my 'stuff' -- my gifts and my money -- that makes me squirm . . .

There are -- at least as I examine my own life -- two primary ways in which we can relate to our 'stuff'. We can:

1. **credit our riches to our own righteousness**, or
2. **see our riches as gifts** from a gracious and loving God -- a God who **made us, knows us, loves us, and wills only good for our lives**.

Let's take a quick look at two simple questions -- two questions that are the root of my 'squirminess' for these passages -- and for all the passages like them in the canon:

1. **Why would we credit our riches to our own righteousness?**
2. **And what happens when we do this?**

I credit whatever riches -- monetary or otherwise -- I have **to my own hard work because I am afraid**. **I am afraid I am not enough** in the world -- I am **not bright enough, not cute enough, not athletic enough**. And -- if you knew me as I really I am -- you would not love me and I would die. And **so I hide behind whatever riches** I have been able to accumulate. And **while I am hiding, I squirm** -- afraid that God or the world will require those riches of me, and I will be revealed for the broken, helpless, lonely person I am.

And what happens when I credit my riches to my own righteousness is just this -- three simple, painful things:

1. **I stop telling the truth about myself and my life** -- I am not righteous -- who I am kidding? My riches are not my own doing -- what a joke!
2. **I cut myself off from the love of God and others** -- not because they refuse to love, but **because I refuse to acknowledge my need for their love**, and
3. **I squirm** (as perhaps you do, too) -- because **every passage** like the ones we have heard today **reminds me of the** heavily-defended house of cards I have constructed, and of the **charade of my very life**.

Okay. So, fine, Frank! What's the other choice? **Suppose we are tired of squirming when we hear readings like the ones appointed for today -- how might we live otherwise -- what's our other choice?**

Our other choice is just this: to see our riches as gifts from a gracious and loving God -- a God who made us, knows us, loves us, and wills only good for our lives. Because **that** is the real truth of all of our lives.

When we see our riches as gifts, we are less afraid. Surely the One who gave before, will give again! Surely the **One who gave would be honored** -- indeed, would require -- **that we also give in imitation of his own giving and life-giving and self-giving.**

When we **see our riches as gifts**, we are free to live the life we heard laid out for us in our epistle lesson from 1 Timothy:

"But as for you, **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called . . .**

1 Timothy 6:11b, 12a (NRSV)

Just this week we **said good-bye to our beloved Dudley Colhoun**, rector emeritus of Saint Paul's. **An incident from Dudley's life bears witness to what happens when we see our riches as a gift** from a loving and gracious God -- **and not as something to be hoarded.**

The Winston-Salem *Journal* carried an article about **Dudley and his involvement in the beginning of a night shelter ministry for the homeless** here in Winston-Salem. **Dudley agreed to let our homeless brothers and sisters spend the night in the Saint Paul's dining room** -- and Saint Paul's was the first church to make this offer.

And Dudley did all this without first running the idea by the vestry. As Don Goodheart said in an interview about Dudley, **"He told me he had his bags packed just in case they fired him."** (And -- I might add parenthetically -- Dudley made the choice anyway.)

Dudley knew the truth of his life: all that he had and all that he was -- was a gift from a gracious and loving God. A gift from a God who made him, knew him, loved him, and willed only good for his life.

And **because Dudley knew this, he didn't have to squirm**, he didn't have to hoard. **Dudley could do God's work in the world and let the consequences fall where they may.** Surely, Dudley thought, if I have to leave Saint Paul's for serving the defenseless in the name of God, the One who gave before will give to me again.

That is the real truth of all of our lives, sisters and brothers: We are -- in God's grace and mercy -- quite enough. We have no need to hoard and no need to squirm.

Our only need is to embrace the love of God and -- from that boundless love -- live the command we heard in 1 Timothy:

"But as for you, **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.**

Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called . . .

1 Timothy 6:11b, 12a (NRSV)

God is saying to me, "**Squirm not, Frank. And fear not. But give -- and live -- as if your very life depends on it. For indeed it does.**"

And I say the same to you, my brothers and sisters. **All that you have is a gift from God. "Squirm not! And fear not! But -- in imitation of Christ and our brother Dudley -- give (and live) as if your very life depends on it. For indeed it does."**

Amen