

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 15, 2012

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As soon as humans began living in communities, folks started to notice who had what and how often those people seemed to be able to get other people to do what they wanted. At the same time there arose prophets who would critique the leaders. If they were not treating the people fairly, the prophets spoke out.

Amos was one of those prophets. In Israel, he was one of the first prophets whose prophecies were written down. Jeroboam was not a good king according to Amos, he and the wealthy in Israel did not treat the poor well, but took advantage of them. Jeroboam's say trumped Yahweh's say, and Amos was there to tell him that because of that, his house would fall. Amaziah was a priest in Jeroboam's temple and he disagreed with Amos. "Go prophesy somewhere else, like the Southern Kingdom where they want to hear your kind of talk. Go to Judah!" Amaziah and Jeroboam enjoyed their kingdom. It worked for them. Such talk of Yahweh and how Judah was right and that the Northern kingdom's high places and sanctuaries were wrong. Israel's version of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was perfectly fine for the Royal family and priesthood!

Go forward almost 1000 years and we find Herod and John the Baptist. Herod marries his brother's wife while his brother is still alive. John the Baptist declares adultery and condemns the new marriage. Herod likes John the Baptist, or at least is afraid that he might have some mysterious secret power. Herodious obviously does not. She hates John and wants to get rid of him for his righteous talk. Evidently she preferred Herod and his power to Philip, her first husband's second best-ness. Wealth and power speak loudly for these kings, queens, and their religious supporters. They all have in common a desire to keep as much of the power and wealth for themselves as possible. Of course, that is a common instinct for all of us.

There are plenty of stories in the Bible that illustrate humanity's desire to hoard wealth and power. King Ahab desires Naboth's vineyard who won't sell it or trade it since he believes it is a sacred inheritance to be kept for future generations. Queen Jezebel has Naboth executed under false charges but Elijah catches up to them. Their greed and injustice comes back to haunt them a few years later. King David, the most righteous of the kings, sells his soul for a moment of adultery, arranges for his friend's death and then marries his friend's wife, not caring who notices or who pays for his greed. Is he surprised even after he confesses his sin when his children fight to the death among themselves?

No matter how well disguised it is, greed shows itself in the end with suffering and misery. It just doesn't look that way in the beginning when there are so many good things to be enjoyed. Over and over the Scriptures show the dark side of even secretly worshipping power and wealth. There is always a price. If we trivialize the suffering of the poor by seeking only our own satisfaction, our lives are a flimsy house of cards which will fall along with Jeroboam and Herod, Ahab, David and Pilate. We must remember, day by day, that the most valuable commodity in our lives is love and sharing generously. We must practice sharing. If we wish to become stronger in love and mercy, we will sacrifice the very things which would otherwise strangle the life and peace out of us. We can't have it both ways.

These stories remind us to look carefully at our own assumptions about wealth and power. They also provide the background for the death of Jesus Christ. In Mark, the contrast between John and Herod is paralleled by that of Jesus and Pilate.

Herod is powerless rather than powerful because of the system to which he belongs. He is powerless to save John the Baptist. So is Pilate in the same way powerless to save Jesus. Power and wealth fail to deliver their delicious promises. Herod and Pilate end up making despicable choices because they are trapped by their own lifestyles.

Jesus teaches us in his life and in his death that faithfulness and mercy are always the path to freedom. Pilate, Herod and the others are the counter example of what happens when we reach out for greater wealth and power. But the freedom of Jesus, of the prophets and saints is a *very* different freedom than what we find in our pop culture—in human society.

The Gospel is the path of freedom to be faithful. A freedom which involves the struggle to practice God's justice and peace. May God set us free to do so, may we follow a simple path which allows us to share freely even as we have freely received.

We have the opportunity this week to serve a crucified Lord who shows us how to live and die with total freedom and perfect integrity. Thanks be to God. May we live with wisdom and compassion. Amen.