

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 21  
October 14, 2018  
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran  
***Have compassion on the poor***

—Amos 5:6,7,10-15

Dear friends in Christ,

You've heard stories of trading places. There's a show called "Under-Cover Boss" where the CEO of a company disguises himself as a new employee of his company. No one recognizes him or treats him with the kind of awe and respect he would otherwise receive. When his identity is revealed, his employees are aghast. Why is that?

Or The Washington Post conducted this experiment: A world-renowned violinist, Joshua Bell, dressed as a poor street performer played a violin that was worth 3.5 million dollars in a Washington DC subway. Over the course of 45 minutes, the violinist played as thousands rushed by, a few tossed some spare change in his violin case. But by and large people viewed him as nothing more than a poor person trying to buy meal. Why is that?

That's the way our world is because that's the way human beings are by nature. We perceive importance, prestige, status largely based on a person's wealth. Why do people consider the CEO's presence more hallowed than that of the hourly employee earning minimum wage? Because he personifies the American dream. Why do people pay hundreds of dollars to hear the world-renowned violinist one night, and toss a few pennies to the homeless street performer the next? Because one is idolized as the upper crust, the other is despised as the bottom of the barrel.

This isn't just a modern problem though. It's the very problem that the Prophet Amos had to address in Ancient Israel. He wasn't talking to a bunch of hungry Israelites wandering in the desert. This was quite a few centuries later and Israel had settled in quite nicely to the land flowing with milk and honey. They had peace and wealth. They lived in luxury homes hewn out of real stone. They slept in beds inlaid with ivory. And that in and of itself wasn't the problem. It was their sinful hearts that turned from the Lord; hearts that didn't recognize everything as a good gift from God, but hearts that made wealth into idols. So Amos prophesied, "***Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire.***"

The problem was that their wealth came at the expense of the poor. Their wealth came through dishonest gain—they were tipping the scales. Many were corrupt and paid off the officials. So Amos prophesied, "***You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain... For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.***"

I'm very confident that most of you are not tipping the scales and padding your pockets through dishonest gain or at the expense of the poor. I also know that God has generously blessed many of us with more than enough to meet our needs and for our enjoyment, and in turn we respond generously to God. But here is a powerful caution for us today in Amos' words to Israel back then: Be careful how you view wealth. Be careful how you view those with or without it.

What if we were to have our own experiment here? If a known-philanthropist who, let's say, was really passionate about building new fellowship halls and classrooms came to church this morning. When he rolls up in his limo, quite a few heads would turn. It would be foolish to not go out of our way to greet and welcome such an honored guest. But what about the person who slept outside last night in clothes that haven't been washed in weeks was sitting on a bench in the courtyard? He didn't even take a bus here. He walked. He smells. Nothing in his appearance indicates that he has even a few dollars let alone great wealth. Would we turn our heads the other way? Would we make nearly the same effort to go and greet such a person? Would he be just as honored as the other guest? Maybe. Maybe not.

The way we view wealth and those who have it or don't have it is a good indicator of where we place our trust. Honoring, admiring, respecting someone with wealth and viewing someone without as less significant is a temptation common to us all. It's the sin the Lord addressed through Amos as a matter of life or death. "***Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire.***"

Oh and by the way, a detail I forgot to mention about the poor person sitting on the courtyard bench—it's Jesus. Outwardly there is nothing in his appearance that should draw us to him. Like the poor, he was despised and rejected by people. He was not someone you would naturally go out of your way to greet, nor was he esteemed

as important or prestigious by worldly standards (See Isaiah 53). Talk about trading places. The creator of the universe and the Lord of all creation was also one of the poorest men who ever walked this earth. They placed him in a manger (that's a nice word for feeding trough-picture a larger version of you dog's water bowl). And it didn't get much better than that. Later in life Jesus said, **"foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head."** Why is that? Why didn't Christ the King roll in to town on a royal chariot? Why didn't he sleep in a stone mansion fit for the King of all creation? Why wasn't he placed in a crib inlaid with ivory?

Why is that? It was really for your sake. The Apostle Paul when writing to the Corinthians about wealth offers this important reminder: **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."** So often we have stood in awe of great worldly wealth and have pitied poverty. And for that sin and many more, Jesus became poor. He became despised even by his Father in heaven while on the cross. By his wounds we are healed. By his poverty we are rich.

Don't overlook the seemingly poor Jesus. Don't try and avoid eye contact. Seek him and live. Fall down at his feet and honor and praise him and thank him for his poverty by which he has made you rich. Rich in God's grace. Rich in God's bountiful mercy and forgiveness, which could not be purchased with all the money in the world, but only with the precious blood of his own Son. And the greatest thing about this kind of wealth that we have in Jesus—It's real. It's not just a dream. It's not a fantasy. It's yours. It's in the vault. It's in the bank credited to your account. This wealth is stored up in heaven where no economic downturn, no natural disaster can touch it. You are rich in God's mercy through Jesus Christ.

Seek that kind of wealth. Hear Amos' call to repentance. **Seek the Lord and live... Seek good, not evil, that you may live...** for us today that means putting our hope in the Jesus and not the fleeting riches of this world. And when we do that, it really changes the way we view wealth, and also the way we view those who have it and those who don't.

We view wealth as a great gift from God. Whether we have little or a lot it all comes from God's gracious hand. But we do not want to think that wealth is sign of God's favor. That's what happened in Amos day. They thought, "We have peace, we have fine homes and comfy beds—we must be good with God." Wealth is not to be a security blanket, but a tool that God gives us to honor him and spread his gospel, to provide for our basic needs, to help others, and even for our own enjoyment. Also, in view of God's grace the treasure that is stored up for us in heaven, we view wealth as something very necessary but also very perishable. Just a recent example of that: did some of you hear this story on the news this past week? A young couple had saved up over a thousand dollars in cash for a family vacation. In a matter of minutes, their toddler found that stash of cash, fed all of it into a paper shredder. Hard earned cash, gone! But our treasure is in heaven where no thief can steal it, no machine can shred it. You want to put your hope in a piece of paper or in the peace that is yours through Christ? It's a no brainer.

God is certainly concerned about how we view wealth and possessions. But most of all, he is concerned about how we view people. In the lesson from Amos you see God's compassion on the poor and needy. In the gospel you see that same compassion for a rich young man. When the young man came to Jesus, **Jesus looked at him and loved him.** He had compassion on his poor soul just as he has compassion on our poor souls. God's compassion on people is not based on wealth or lack thereof. God does not show favoritism. Look at people the way Jesus looks at people—not with favoritism, but with compassion. You'll probably have a chance to do that later today. Think of all the people that you will encounter just later today. Maybe there will be an unfamiliar face sitting on the bench in our courtyard, or even in the pew next to you. It's not just a random person, in the background; it's a soul whom Jesus values very highly. If you stop at Fry's on your way home the person bagging your groceries is not there merely to serve you; she is also precious soul whom Jesus came to serve by laying down his life. In hurting eyes of the lonely, in the pained eyes of the sick, and in the searching eyes of the lost, see the face of Jesus and serve them, love them as you would love Jesus. Amen.