A Homily by the Rev. Steven P. Sabin

The Scripture readings that form the basis for this homily appear at the end of this text.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: This has been one of those weeks where I have definitely felt the need for God’s strength. It is a week where I have been tired, depressed, feeling as if there is this tremendous weight on top of me. One of the places I have localized this feeling is that I am sick of politics. I am so tired of advertisements. I am tired of yammering pundits and talking heads. I am tired of the first and the last thing on my radio in the morning and at night is always about this charge or that charge, is this statement truthful or that statement truthful. I just wanted to throw my hands up and say, “Enough is enough.” Therefore, I thought I would try to do what I often do when I am feeling oppressed, lonely, tired, and weak. I would turn to prayer and scripture. Alas, I did not find much help. I say that with fear and trepidation. It is not a great thing for a preacher to say that I turned to prayer and scripture this week and I did not find much help.

I hope you notice that the Old Testament reading today was all about economics. I did not want to hear about economics this week. I wanted to hear something soothing. I wanted to hear about how God was my rock and refuge. I did not want to hear about unjust balances and unfair trade practices and things like that. That’s what Amos is talking about. I found that frustrating. The Gospel was of no help at all. The Gospel was not only seemingly about more economics but it was bizarre and was almost incomprehensible. Or so I thought.

Then I said to myself, “Alright, at least I have the solace of prayer.” Prayer has been going fairly well around here in terms of our daily prayer offices. We have had people here. Just the other day we gathered together, I guess it was Friday, we gathered together for noon prayer and I thought, “Okay, this is going to help me,” Who should show up, in addition to some of our regulars, but a homeless gentlemen whom I’ve had a number of opportunities to deal with. He has some very real needs, but is one of those guys who is just kind of hard to work with. Unfortunately, he smells a little bit and his English is almost incomprehensible. Just trying to work through to what his need is becomes a very tiresome thing. I was sitting here ready
for prayer and we started praying. He was sitting over there in the corner pew. We got to the line in daily prayer that we say everyday, “Let not the needy be forgotten, O Lord, nor the hope of the poor be taken away.” I wanted to say, “Not here too!” Suddenly, this had the makings of a difficult situation. I was pondering how I could help this man. Could I help him? Does he have a legitimate need, or is he trying to jerk me around a little bit? At the same time I had just publicly said in his presence, “Let not the needy be forgotten, O Lord, nor the hope of the poor be taken away.” That is what we call a bad negotiation strategy. I threw all of my tools away at that point, but we have to confront a need here. Things were just not working out for my comfort.

As a matter of last resort, I went to one of those passages of scriptures that I really like to meditate on when I am feeling bad. I went to the Beatitudes in Matthew 5.

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I thought, okay, now I am on to something; I feel better. Then I did something very stupid. Given the fact that this is the year of Luke and all of our readings come from Luke, I should at least give Luke fair time and equal treatment. So I sat down with Luke’s Beatitudes in chapter 6.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh. 22 “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you\textsuperscript{d} on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 25 “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.\textsuperscript{2}

God, give me a break. Dear brothers and sisters, it is not that any Christians, particularly likes politics. When we are confronted with scripture passages such as we have this week; when the prayer tradition of our church is hammering away constantly at our need to attend to those who are in need, suddenly, it seems that the heart of what it is to be a Christian is not my state of warm fuzziness. What matters is my state of faithfulness in a world that is a lot of work. That is uncomfortable.

I remember one of my professors in seminary telling me a very difficult truth. He said, “The gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” Again, I did not want to hear that. I did not want to hear the difficult gospel this week. What does this Gospel reading mean, by the way? God in Christ, in this passage, looks at all wealth, all of our possessions, everything about the material world in which we live as dishonest wealth. God points out that it is not ours in the first place. We hold everything in trust. We hold it in stewardship. What is ours is our relationship with God and by extension, our relationship with our brothers and sisters in humanity. The Gospel teaches that if I am faithful in the very little things, by which it means wealth, there is a better chance that I will be faithful in the important things like my relationship to you all. The Gospel tells me that I should pay attention to what goes on between God and me and between my brothers and sisters and me. I should not put price tags on it. I should not sweat the logistics of it, but that is very hard. It is difficult to do that. I was looking for comfort and I was unhappy until I started to have one little insight.

\textsuperscript{d} Gk cast out your name as evil
Maybe this is what God wanted me to see in answer to my prayer. I was looking for comfort, happiness, and ease in a very passive way. I wanted to sit here this week and have a feeling of rest, completeness, and joy just descend upon me. I did not want to do anything for it. I came to realize that maybe my sense of ease, my sense of comfort, my sense of completion could not come passively. It could not just descend on me from above. Because that peace I was searching for is made out of knitting us together to the extent that we are at peace, just, and right with God. The end of that equation is feeling good and feeling joy. Joy comes to us from a right relationship with God and a right relationship with our sisters and brothers.

How does that address my oppression about politics? Maybe I need to take it a little less personally. Maybe it is not about this guy or that guy or this woman or that woman. Maybe it is not about me being right, our side winning. Maybe if I was a little more invested in the larger concept of justice, the larger concept of freedom, the larger concept of wisdom, the larger concept of forgiveness. Maybe if I was a little quicker to see good in those with whom I disagree. Maybe if I listened to that oh-so difficult explanation of the Eighth Commandment that is actually my favorite explanation by Martin Luther. The Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Martin Luther’s explanation, “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

Oh, that is so hard. When I manage this, I am a much happier person because then I am not insulted all the time. I am not hurt all the time. I am not ridiculed all the time because I know Don really didn’t mean to hurt my feelings. I know that Brian really wasn’t full of sarcasm, but it was just a momentary speech impediment. Maybe if I was just a little quicker to recognize that democrats and republicans really are brothers and sisters rather than enemies of each other, and that perhaps everyone who casts a vote somewhere in their heart actually has the best interests of the people in mind. At least if I believe that, or believe that until proven otherwise, then maybe this would be less of a traumatic season for me. Maybe if I banish the words all and never and none from my vocabulary and put a little more

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emphasis on many and some and a great deal of; maybe I’d be happier. Nevertheless, more importantly and beyond my happiness, maybe I would manage to be a little more faithful. I have to ponder that more. I have been called to be a steward. This week I find myself rendering an account of my stewardship to myself, to my conscience, and ultimately to God. That is not a bad thing. It is also not a bad thing to be reminded that my convenience and my comfort do not matter as much as that daily recited prayer, “Let not the needy be forgotten, O Lord, nor the hope of the poor be taken away.”

That is not to say that I do not matter, but my convenience is not more important than real need. My transitory emotional state is not the foundation of wisdom — God is. The well-being of my brothers and sisters is. So perhaps I will not be quite so anxious and maybe a little less doctrinaire, but I will try to have a little more heart and more forgiveness and an open mind, although occasionally people say it is an empty mind. I will try. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, perhaps the one word of confidence and comfort comes to us from that second lesson. If we will all pray, pray for our rulers, pray for our societies, pray for each other that together and united we might “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” under God. Amen.

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Amos 8:4-7 (NRSV)

4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, 5 saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, 6 buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” 7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

1 Timothy 2:1-7 (NRSV)

2 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself a ransom for all

—this was attested at the right time. 7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, a I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV)

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your
management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7 Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth\textsuperscript{b} so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.\textsuperscript{c}

10 “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth,\textsuperscript{d} who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”\textsuperscript{e}

\textsuperscript{b} Gk \textit{mammon}
\textsuperscript{c} Gk \textit{tents}
\textsuperscript{d} Gk \textit{mammon}
\textsuperscript{e} Gk \textit{mammon}