

“Smelling Like the Sheep”

Amos 8:4-7, Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; I Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

**Part two of the sermon series,
“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 18, 2022, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20, dedicated to the memory of George Richardson who taught me a lot about love, laughter, and fun, to the memory of Harvey Kiesel, husband of Hilda and father of Tom who died on August 26, to the memory of Olive Lucille Weller, grandmother of Gretchen Weller-Cooks, to Malcolm and Madeline Bonham, twins of Chris and Stefanie (Weaver) Bonham in the NICU at Riverside Hospital and always to the glory of God!

“Smelling Like the Sheep”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The prophet Amos was a shepherd. While we think of him making a living with declarations about justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, he actually paid the bills watching sheep. No one, except maybe King David, knew more about sheep anywhere in scripture than Amos.

One day, while he was minding his own business and tending his sheep, God gave Amos a vision about what needed to happen to

the nation Israel. The humble herdsman left the hills of Tekoa, near Bethlehem and headed north to deliver God's message. It was a vision of future judgement for Judah and for Israel. God's word was a scorched earth denunciation against all nations and leaders who had harmed God's people. Then, just at the moment when Israel was cheering as the prophet leveled their enemies, Amos turned his full throttle message on Israel themselves. He said they had hurt themselves, too — by being complacent, by worshipping their worship instead of their God, by feeding their greed, by acting with cruelty to the poor, and by living lives that lacked spiritual integrity and heartfelt obedience to God. He questioned how “other concerns” had taken the place of God in their lives. They had turned against each other rather than turning toward God.

When the shepherd was done, and he only spent a few weeks with his prophecy, he had leveled the entire playing field of faith. Not one person could count themselves greater than any other. No one was spared God's hard-hitting judgement from the herdsman of Tekoa. Just before he left, he offered one verse of hope, “I will plant them upon their land, and shall never again be plucked up, out of the land I have given them, says the Lord” (Amos 9:15).

Then, he picked up his shepherd's staff and returned to his flock on the hillsides of Tekoa. He left every single man, woman and child with a lot to think about and a lot to change about themselves and their behavior. No one was left without reflection on their lives of faith.

Although not a shepherd, Jeremiah had deep concerns about the present pain and the future hope of his people, too. For 40 years he

was a prophet of God to five kings of Judah. As he watched God's people slide into destruction, he cried out to "Stop! Turn around! And Return to God." In today's passage, he laments, "O that my head were a spring of water and eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep all day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

Lost Sheep and matters of their care (or lack of care) enter Jeremiah's prophetic vision continuously. He writes about sheep and shepherds throughout his book – mentioning them at least eight times, the final time being Jeremiah 50:6, *"My people are lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, causing them to roam the mountains. They have wandered from mountain to hill; they have forgotten where they rest."*

Sheep kept being mentioned, not because they were cute Zoo animals' worth looking at and reflecting on, but because they were vital to the economy and the success of the people. The sheep's care and the success of the sheep big business was a measure of how the economy was doing. They were sort of like the canary in the coal mine.

In Luke 16, Jesus picks up the story of rural economy and the ways in which people drive it. He tells us a story of a big landowner and his trickster CFO. In this tale, the boss, who apparently made his fortune lending out land in return for (over)payment in produce, learns that his manager was less than devoted to increasing his master's fortune. Jesus doesn't say whether the manager was inept or dishonest, but the owner decided to call for an audit and send the guy packing. That's when the debt-collector-for-hire initiated a new, creative management strategy. Both boss and CFO knew that the tenant farmers' debts would probably never be paid in full.

A drought, a flood, a plague of insects and other all-too-normal catastrophes regularly ruined sharecroppers' chances of getting out of debt. They knew that.

Here's where the manager proves that he's smarter than the boss gave him credit for. He calls in the people defaulting on their loans and offers them a discount in return for immediate payment. The genius of the situation is that the new payment is within the means of the debtors, it brings otherwise unobtainable income to the owner, and it puts the manager in good graces with both sides. It's an ethically questionable situation of win-win and win!

Was Jesus accepting the trickery in light of the results? It does seem so, doesn't it? First, explaining the manager's activity, Jesus advises, *"Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon."* (**Mammon**, according to Scripture scholar Jesuit Fr. Silvano Fausti, is **surplus money – more than one needs to live decently.**) A few lines later, Jesus warns, "You cannot serve both God and mammon." Jesus seems to be saying that mammon has questionable value in itself, but can and should be used to do some good.

In his encyclical offered early in the pandemic, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis makes this same point. He looks to St. John Chrysostom, one of the Fathers of the Church who taught: *"Not to share our wealth [think mammon] with the poor is to rob them and take away their livelihood. The riches we possess are not our own, but theirs as well."* Some may call Chrysostom naïve; some may call him a socialist, or perhaps a communist. In his own day, he was exiled by the Empress Eudoxia who refused to tolerate his critiques of the lavish life of the clergy and court. Nevertheless, his ideas reflect Jesus' own teaching.

There's no getting around it, as Luke moves toward the climax of his Gospel, his emphasis on reverence for the life and thriving of the poor grows stronger in each verse. Today's Gospel, praising the wily manager, is a gentle introduction to what will be coming in the chapters and verses ahead.

Let us return to Francis – a few more times before I sit down. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis wrote *Fratelli Tutti* as a reflection on the solidarity that humanity could have created when faced by our common vulnerability. It was the first piece I remember being written late in 2020 about a post-pandemic world – from an economic and theological point of view. Francis described the pre-COVID world as one that, perhaps like the big landowner in Luke, fed on dreams of grandeur and consumed distraction, insularity, and solitude. Francis' prescription for such a world goes to the heart of the wily manager's methodology. He calls us to cultivate a shared passion and a community of belonging and solidarity “worthy of our time, energy and resources.” It's that simple and it's that challenging.

Amos and Jeremiah demonstrate – with prophetic power – how to look at reality with eyes that perceive how our societal norms grant excess to some, leaving others to languish. Is it not time to ask which of our social systems are truly worthy of the respect they are given in the law? When the unrighteous manager went around the law, might we say that he advanced a community of solidarity? Might Jesus just tell us, “Go and do likewise?” (drawn from Sr. Mary M. McGlone, Srs. of St. Joseph of Carondelet, in *National Catholic Reporter*, September 17, 2022).

Beyond the processes of farm management and developing OUR community of belonging and solidarity, we are not yet done with the

sheep (nor are the sheep done with us!). So let me circle back. There is something about their smell that begs our attention.

Back on Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2013, a rather young Pope Francis (76 at the time) called on his priests to get outside of themselves. He noted that too many of them had become managers of their congregations. They sat at desks becoming dissatisfied, losing heart, and reflecting a sense of being collectors of antiquities and novelties. He said it like this: *“If you do not go outside of yourself by being a mediator between God and humanity, you gradually become a manager and God did not call you to be a manager. God called you to be a pastor. So, go and smell like the sheep.”*

He said, *“bring the healing power of God’s grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized and be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.”* He continued, *“When you don’t put your own skin and own heart on the line, you never hear a warm, heartfelt word of ‘thanks’ from those you have helped.... If you hang out with the sheep, they rub off on you and you smell like them. And when you start smelling like them, that is a good thing!”*

As a pastor, Pope Francis’ words really hit home. It is easy to get caught up in the paperwork and emails and in all the desktop work and meetings and forget people and their concerns. We can all fall prey to that. Since COVID, more and more of us seek Zoom rooms rather than meeting rooms; isolation rather than congregation; staying away to stay safe and secure rather than coming together and coming to know one another. We can’t smell the sheep. We can only smell ourselves (which may or may not be similar).

But, when we emerge and go out, we have the opportunity to stir up God’s grace and engage others right where they are. We see their

eyes. We hold their hands. We pray together. We embrace and we gain strength – together.

One last thought. I texted the only shepherd I know, my cousin Ruth Parker. I asked her about the smell of the sheep. She said, *“All livestock have a smell. Sheep add the hint of lanolin (on the wool breeds). (I think to myself are there non-wool breeds?) But I don’t think they smell more than any other form of livestock, maybe even less, because they live in pasture. Doesn’t bother me. Pigs on the other hand...ewww!”* That is how her text ended. I love this response! Just getting out in the pasture to care for woolly ones is enough. It’s enough! It’s enough for each of us and all of us! Then we realize, there is not much of a smell at all because we are with family. We are together again.

In the spirit of Amos and Jeremiah, let’s get out there and do the work of justice for all. In the spirit of Jesus, let’s get with the program, and when we do, we might find we all smell like the sheep. Amen.

