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A House with Two Masters

The Rev. David C. Bloom

Sermon given at Plymouth Congregational, United Church of Christ

Amos 5:21-24

Matthew 6:19-21, 24

Pope Francis rocked the Catholic Church around the world this week when he said that the church has grown “obsessed” with abortion, gay marriage, and contraception. He criticized the church for putting dogma before love, and for prioritizing particular moral doctrines over serving the poor and marginalized. The Pope said the church should be a home for all and not just those who adhere to a rigid orthodoxy. He further warned that such dogmatic obsession could cause the church “to fall like a house of cards.” He said, The church needs “pastors who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them.”

To use the language of the computer era, I would call this a moral and ethical reset for the Catholic Church, away from its obsession with largely sexual matters and toward a ministry of compassion for the poor and the marginalized and the lonely and the dispossessed—that is, toward the people of God in all of their humanity. It is almost as if Pope Francis is embodying the words of Jesus: “Come unto to me all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” In effect he is saying, “This is our ministry!”

Now you may say, “But I am not Catholic, what does this have to do with me and Plymouth Church?” Whether we like it or not, the Catholic Church by its sheer size and influence and history sets a tone for the Christian Church in all of its manifestations. When the Latin American bishops declared that the Christian faith had a preferential option for the poor, Protestants in many places took that as a mandate to work for social justice. And when the church came down so heavily on abortion and gay rights and contraception, it created political, social, and religious barriers for the work of many Christians who sought more open attitudes and policies in these areas.

The theologian Letty Russell echoes the Pope’s description of the church as a home for all through her image of a table: “Often persons are excluded from the tables of life,” she says, “through denial of shared food and resources... At God’s final banquet, all will be invited and able to feast together. Like the eucharist, the round table

is a sign of the coming unity of humanity.” But in our “divided and dominated world,” as Russell calls it, when will we get there?

That question confronts and confounds us again and again, especially in this city where we see growing homelessness, untreated mental illness on our streets, and increasing numbers of our fellow citizens who work fulltime and more and are unable to provide for their families—working, but living in poverty. Where is the place at the tables of life for these brothers and sisters of ours?

When I was in seminary in the late 1960’s—the era of Vietnam protests, civil rights demonstrations, and urban riots in cities across America—the church, with a few notable exceptions, seemed to stand by unable to figure out what to do. Many of us seminarians at that time—who, of course, had all the answers—were fond of quoting the Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan: “The church always arrives on the scene a little breathless and a little late.”

Has anything changed? Where do we stand today, for example, on the persistence and the deepening of poverty across our land, including in our own city of Seattle. Both Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, in whose tradition he stood, spoke emphatically that the measure of our faith involved our treatment of the poor and the neglected. How else do we understand his admonition in Matthew 25 that in the feeding and clothing and welcoming the poor, the stranger, and the imprisoned, we do it to him and in so doing are being faithful to God’s call?

The ethical traditions and teachings of our faith are clear, but we still tend to stand by and wonder what to do, fearful that we are being too political or that we might offend the business community or, God forbid, violate polite propriety. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, that Christ invites us to come and die with him, we are not at all sure we want to go there. We will willingly offer shelter to those who are homeless or a warm meal for the hungry, but are we also willing to confront a political and economic system that keeps people poor and homeless and publicly condemn it as corrupt? Or does this push us too far beyond our comfort zones.

In my nearly 40 years in Seattle I have witnessed some of the most troublesome and challenging issues facing our city. Homelessness has increased about 1,000 percent since it began to emerge as a serious issue in the late 1970’s. People work full-time in the hospitality and service industries, but do not make a living wage. Poverty stalks too many of our families with children. Racial disproportionality in education, employment, income, and criminal justice undermines our city’s pristine image as a major hub of youthful-spirit and high-tech innovation.

Yet, when I ran for Seattle City Council four years ago the Seattle Times wrote in its endorsement editorial about me, "We are concerned that he would view too many issues through the prism of the disadvantaged," and they endorsed my opponent. Craig Rennebohm, who is well known to this congregation, replied in a letter to the Times, "So, what is Bloom supposed to do: view the issues through the prism of the advantaged?" Good question!

I lost the election, but the moment has stuck with me. It seems to me that the Times' concern represents a dilemma that continues to confound our society, especially the church, that is: whose interests are most important and what is our responsibility for one another? Are we called to serve God or is our primary allegiance to the values of the dominant society. Jesus put it more directly in today's gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount: "You cannot serve two masters; you cannot serve both God and money."

The words "wealth" and "mammon" and "money" are used in different translations of this reading, but the meaning is the same: will we serve the values of the world, the values of accumulating more and more stuff or will we serve the God who calls us to give our lives so that others may live. This is not an easy question, surrounded as we are by unprecedented affluence and a society that praises its acquisition at every turn. But it is a challenge to us who call ourselves Christian about where our ultimate priorities lie. Are they with maintaining the status quo as dictated by the dominant society or are they with the counter-cultural values of our faith that call into question the very values on which our economy is built, values that largely extol the glorification of wealth and its acquisition and the punishment of those who do not have it. I only need to point to the recent attempts by Republicans in Congress to gut the food stamp program as one example of that punishment.

Abraham Lincoln, in his famous "house divided" speech to the Illinois legislature in 1858 said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Now he was speaking about slavery and that he did not believe that the American government could survive half-slave and half-free, that it would be one thing or the other, but could not be both. I realize that I may be stretching the metaphor, but the point is important. Where our ultimate loyalties lie will determine where we place our treasures and our endeavors. As Jesus said in Matthew 6, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So what do we do with this? How can we be a church that is dedicated to the love of God and service to humanity without being corrupted by the love of money? All

the social and economic indicators are telling us that our society is becoming more unbalanced between the rich and the poor.

- 95% of the economic gains in the recent recovery have gone to the now infamous 1%, while most in the bottom 99% have actually lost ground
- The Walton family of Walmart owns more wealth than the bottom 40 percent of Americans
- The gap between CEO incomes and ordinary workers' wages has increased by about 1,000% since the 1950's

Janitors, maintenance workers, hotel workers, and cashiers in Seattle all earn less than \$25,000 a year, placing them only a few thousand dollars above the federal poverty level for a family of three, a typical family size for many of these workers, well below the self-sufficiency standard and well below the federal low-income level.

By any measure working people are losing ground in America, people of color and single parents are being disproportionately affected, and the lines at our food banks and emergency shelters continue to grow. Many who work are homeless. Many families who do have homes skimp on food and medical care and heat and clothing just so they can pay the rent. And in addition to our underfunded and overstretched public services, it is the religious community that is subsidizing low paying jobs by providing food and shelter and various forms of emergency assistance.

As a result, we are now hearing a growing demand for living wage jobs. Walmart and fast food workers have been staging walkouts with a simple message, "We cannot support ourselves and especially not our families at poverty wages. In response, 62% of the voters in Long Beach, California recently approved an ordinance to pay hotel workers there at least \$13 an hour, and in the city of Sea-Tac there is now an initiative on the ballot that would pay airport workers \$15 an hour. As the minimum wage across the country has lagged behind the cost of living, there is growing concern that our service and retail and hospitality and other low-wage workers that local economies depend upon receive a wage that gets them out of poverty.

It's no longer just a matter of the poor and the disadvantaged and our practices of charity, but about the ability of our nation as a whole to sustain over time an economy and a social policy that provides opportunity for all of its citizens and assures that those at the economic margins—including those who work—are not forced into lifelong privation, because that is the direction we are moving now. More than 300 verses in the Bible deal with the issue of poverty and our responsibility both to ameliorate it and to build systems of social and economic justice. Economic justice is a religious issue. Some would say it is the fundamental religious issue.

As people of faith we have a stake in confronting the problems facing our low-income workers, bringing those problems into public view, aligning ourselves with our allies in the labor, political, and progressive communities and working for a living wage, safer working conditions, and essential benefits for the very people who make our city work.

And lest we think that all of these factors are the result of the inexorable forces of the market, I refer you to Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz who in his book *The Price of Inequality* says, "Politics have shaped the market, and shaped it in ways that advantage the top at the expense of the rest." Worse, America is paying a high price for inequality, he says, because it leads to lower growth, less efficiency, and the misuse of our working people. But politics, Stiglitz insists, is subject to change. And so we have our work cut out for us.

In recent months the Church Council of Greater Seattle, with significant contributions from both Jennifer Hagedorn and Don Bell, has been focusing on living wage issues and has developed a set of Living Wage Principles for congregations to support. "A living wage," the principles state, "allows a person or family to be financially self-sufficient and to modestly participate in the fullness of life that God envisions for all people. Access to living wage employment for all workers is fundamental to both the economic and social prosperity of any community. Conversely, the lack of living wages places tremendous stress on both public assistance programs and on charitable efforts, especially those of the religious community. We envision a society in which full-time workers receive compensation sufficient to allow them to live with independence and dignity, without charitable assistance."

It is my hope that Plymouth Church, with its progressive tradition and historic commitment to social justice, will sign on to these principles. Even more important, it is my hope that in so doing, this will not represent just another project of Plymouth Church but will be a statement that says, "This is who we are! We are a congregation that stands with the working people of Seattle, including the many service and retail and hospitality workers who are our neighbors in downtown Seattle; the workers we rely on to make our city work and to make our lives easier!"

Last month our nation celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his stirring "I have a dream" speech. We honor Dr. King as a great civil rights leader. But he saw that the movement that he led also had to be about economic justice. Remember, the signs at the March on Washington read "Jobs and Freedom." And the reason he went to Memphis at the end of his life was to stand with the janitorial workers who were marching for better wages

and benefits and working conditions. While we have made huge advances in civil rights so that legal segregation and discrimination are now against the law, we continue to struggle with the deeper systemic issue of economic injustice.

Dr. King continually reminded us that God's call to us is not to build magnificent temples for the glorification of God through conspicuous acts of worship. No, God's call is to be about the building of what King called the beloved community. One of his favorite scriptures was the words of the prophet Amos in Amos 5, and with this I close:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

And then over and over again, Dr. King, almost as if he were channeling Amos, would say:

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

May it be so for those of us who still believe in the dream.