

Week 25 – Ordinary Time – September 19, 2010

As I was walking into a doctor's office recently a patient was walking out. Right there in the waiting room, she turned back toward the doctor and complained loudly enough for anyone to hear, "You mean, I have to get rid of these shoes?" "Yes," he said, "send them to Uganda!" She had on something resembling flipflops, and I imagine he had told her that wearing them all day long was having a bad effect on her feet, her legs, and her back. I'm sure he didn't mean his remark literally. But, as many of you know, a friend of mine is a priest in Uganda. So even though I wasn't part of this conversation, I was now. When he said, "Send those shoes to Uganda!" I said, "Why punish someone there?"

Often when we give to the poor, we give them what we don't want. We donate used clothing that doesn't fit any more, that is stained beyond cleaning, or that has gone hopelessly out of style. We clean our cupboards of canned goods that have passed the expiration date, and we donate those to the food pantry. We give away as gifts items we received but that we never really wanted. Some people make a business out of it. Scam artists work on you through the US Mail, television, radio and the internet. They befriend the elderly and talk them out of their savings. Loan sharks hand money over to those who need help, but then charge exorbitant interest. It's bad enough that we have in our society people who are in debt; it is worse that we have others who drive them deeper into a hole from which they can never crawl out.

Oh, was Amos the prophet ever accusing the businesses of his day. He hears people ask, "When will the new moon be over that we may sell our grain?" "[When will] the sabbath [be over], that we may display our wheat?" Unbelievably, here are people determined to obey God's law concerning keeping holy the Sabbath day, but ignoring the laws concerning justice for the poor. Amos hears people say they will fix the scales for cheating. They will buy poor people to work as their slaves, and they will package up the dust from the threshing floor and hide it in the bottom of sacks of wheat. The poor will never know till they get home and the unethical sellers will have the hard-earned coins of the poor deep in their pockets. Amos rails against unscrupulous people who deliberately deceive and degrade the poor. Then he speaks God's message about those crooks: "Never will I forget a thing they have done."

I hope no one who obeys the laws of the Church turns around and deliberately defrauds the poor, but any of us can do it in hidden ways. We spend more on ourselves than we give to the needy. We have things in our closets that others could have used more than we ever did. We take advantage of other drivers on the road. We are stingy with taxes that might benefit the disadvantaged and with jobs that might enhance a person's life. Jesus says you cannot serve both God and mammon, but that is what the people in Amos's day were trying to do.

Amos says God does not forget the wrong we have done. If we have the opportunity to lift up the poor, and we take advantage of them instead, God will remember our deeds.