25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The parable about the dishonest steward seems so far from Jesus' own values that the original group selecting the readings for us to hear on Sundays decided not to put it in the lectionary. A couple members of that group disagreed. They thought—"It's in the bible, people should hear it." Their efforts failed until the last moment, when whoever was responsible agreed with them and put it in.

If you've seen videos of Charlie Kirk debating college students on controversial questions, you can imagine the dialogue Jesus enjoyed over a parable like this one. Today, people on both sides of the aisle would debate Jesus on his principles here. They'd say, "You think the steward in your parable is being prudent, but he's cheating." It'd be fun to hear how Jesus would reply. He loved the poor, so in his views, generosity and forgiveness outweighed reimbursement and punishment.

Jesus said nothing novel. In today's passage from the prophet Amos, we heard how God upbraided dishonest salespeople who fixed their scales for cheating the innocent. Amos hears merchants giddy over their scams: "We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!" Then Amos discloses the angry, imperious words of the Lord: "Never will I forget a thing they have done." Dishonesty is bad; taking advantage of the poor for personal gain is worse.

In the parable, why did the steward hand over the promissory notes and lower them? What was his motive? On the brink of losing his job for squandering his master's property, why did he think cheating his master further would improve his situation? And why did his gambit work? We don't know. That's what makes discussing this parable so lively. We can speculate about the steward's motives: Perhaps he just wanted to make friends, so someone would help him in his upcoming unemployment. If this happened in real life today, someone on social media would likely propose a different motive: The steward wanted to stick it to his master, or, the steward hated his master. Then, if the steward posted, "I don't hate him," the accuser might counter, "And you're a liar."

At this time of American history when we've lost much civil discourse, it's common to hear accusations about motives. For example, "The reason the other side does these things is they hate you." Probably not, but it's easier to call someone a hater and a liar than to listen patiently to their viewpoint, seeking out areas of agreement, and living with differences.

The suspect in Kirk's assassination texted a potential motive: "I've had enough of his hatred. Some hate can't be negotiated out." Misreading someone's motives can lead to violence. Understanding someone's motives can prevent violence.

Today's readings vindicate the monetary poor. OK, let's not hate them. But some people are poor in their ability to communicate with you or to remain faithful to their commitments. You may conclude, "They have hate," but God may conclude, "They need help." People can disagree without hating. Even children do this. Before we presume someone has hate, we may consider God's motives. As we sang in today's responsorial, "Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor."