

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
Nehemiah 11:25-29
Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14
James 5:1-6
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48
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There's a lot in our readings today about divine judgment, the fires of Gehenna and worms that never die. There is always a temptation to disregard these passages, and preach about something more pleasant. But divine judgment is a recurring theme in scripture, and demands our attention.

I find today's reading from the letter of James particularly compelling. We are all familiar with the cliché; "You can't take it with you." James, today, appears to contradict this piece of conventional wisdom. His view seems to be that we *have* to take it with us, and that that should worry us. He contends that the treasures we accumulate in life trail behind us to testify for us, or against us, at the final judgment. James warns the rich that their silver and gold will condemn them. It's not that there is something intrinsically evil about precious metals. What matters is the way they are acquired, and how they are used. James refers to wages unjustly withheld from farmhands, and wealth hoarded when it should have been used to help victims of war and famine. It is wealth like this that we drag after ourselves to the Day of Judgment. One is reminded of the ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, who comes back to haunt his old partner Scrooge. Marley's ghost drags behind him rusty old money boxes, and loan ledgers -- the treasures he cherished in life.

Now we might find all this irrelevant to our own situation. We are not greedy Victorian merchants, and few of us have farmhands to defraud. But there are plenty of victims of war and famine in the world. We ignore them at our peril. Unlike Scrooge and Marley, we do not revel in driving the poor into workhouses for our own profit. But many of us are driven by some form of peer pressure to commit hurtful acts that we otherwise would never consider. We might work for companies or organizations that have corporate cultures that can coerce us into acting unjustly. For example, if you owned a small business, would you fire a capable family man who had been working for you for twenty years, in order to hire a twenty year old at half the salary? Of course you wouldn't. But would you fire a dozen middle-aged heads of households and replace them with cheaper young workers if it were required as part of a corporate restructuring? This kind of thing happens all the time. Wages drawn for such actions might cry aloud to God for justice. And it is easy enough to imagine analogous situations in other walks of life, including my own. It seems that often we are only as moral as the circumstances of our lives allow us to be without our taking too much trouble – without our risking anything really important. Christ expects more of us.

The treasures we gather in the course of a lifetime tell a lot about us. They form a kind of résumé of the way we have invested the life God has given us. Of course, the best treasures are those which are immune to rust and tarnish -- acts of charity and compassion motivated by love for God and our neighbor. These are treasures that will offer eloquent testimony on our behalf when Christ comes in glory.