

Pentecost Proper 23, October 14 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Amos 5:6-7,10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

At least two things struck me about today's readings. Firstly, I have this odd sense that I must have slept for about six months and woken up in April, in Lent! These could easily be Lenten readings; though I'd also say that the penitential theme is right for a Celtic Sunday 'cos Celts were nothing if not penitential!

The second thing is related to the trip I've just returned from – one of the things that struck me as we journeyed to Warsaw and then Krakow to visit Rachel's brother, who retired there, what the simple fact that we were able to afford to go. In some parts of the world, the cost of our trip (and it was pretty 'bare-bones' staying with family/eating in) would exceed the average **annual** income of the poorest on our planet by ten times – it would take the average worker ten years to cover the cost of that trip!

I recognize - I hope with some humility - just exactly how blessed and privileged I am to be able to take this trip. It also occurred quite forcefully to me that there's a flip-side to this recognition, namely that I have some responsibility around how I use the remarkable financial wealth with which I've been blessed.

Now some say - and with some justification - that this poorest worker (who lives in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo and earns about \$400 a year) is almost certainly, might be – probably is – blessed in other ways. The pitfall here for me is that sounds like an excuse, a justification for not paying attention to the poverty of others. Its easy – and I know I do it – to use that view like a “get out of jail free” card for me when I confront this huge financial disparity. Both the recognition of privilege and blessing on the one hand, and the responsibility for others on the other hand are important.

Even though it seems like Amos only focuses on the second – the “huge financial disparity” – he actually gets the first, too. It's easy to see that he's the epitome of a prophet, and a prophet is someone who finds virtue in *doing*, who sees their faith expressed in concrete action. Amos would agree with words written the Letter of James on this topic: “Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” (James 2:18) He does a great job of challenging us (as James does) to ask ourselves if we're truly committed to social justice.

The other part – that's masked by the power of Amos' focus on social justice – is very important too. Seeing both parts helps us see **and respond to** a divide in pretty much every faith tradition. You can see this other part, this other stream, in those who find virtue more in being – those who, in the language of the Letters of Peter understand themselves as being part of the royal priesthood of Christ, who recognize the blessings we have received from God and who respond to those blessings with praise and worship.

Holding these two perspectives in tension is vital, because within Christian tradition today – within congregations as well as denominations – these two perspectives often seem to be at war with one another.

Each perspective seems willing to use guilt as a primary weapon:

- Should I feel guilty for God's blessings that allowed me to fly to Poland, and not giving that money to the poor? Shouldn't I be all about *doing*?
- Or should I feel guilty for engaging in social activism, to the detriment of my focus on being a part of a faith community that prays and worships? Shouldn't I be all about *being*?

This is where we need to hear Amos' speaking for both perspectives. Throughout his writing, Amos invoked the one in support of the other – he called for people of faith to deploy liturgical action – worship in the tradition of their common faith – in pursuit of justice; to live out their devotion to their faith by always choosing good when presented with the option between good and evil. **We need both parts of our faith to work together!**

Bottom line with Amos: yes we need to be more engaged with issues of social justice from within the context of a faithful, religious, community-based life – with appropriate acts of repentance for our failure to do so in the past.

And then there's that rich young man in the gospel reading from Mark! Superficially we can applaud him – at least for the first half of the story – because he seems to be trying to follow the Ten Commandments. **Jesus' responses bring out how it's possible to try and be faithful yet at the same time to miss completely the point about Jesus.**

Does Jesus' abruptness surprise you? After all, the young man called him "good"?! "Don't call me good, no one is good but God!" Jesus growls! WHY? Look at what Jesus is doing: he's deflecting the young man's attention – and that of everyone else who's there listening – off of himself and onto God. It's a good feeling when people come and ask you questions and you can answer them! You're the expert now!! Flattery will get you everywhere! Except with Jesus! Jesus pushes away from himself the seductive invitation to pride, and instead returns the focus to God, and God alone: he's being a living example of the first part of the Ten Commandments. And notice how he follows up by referencing the second half: **"it's not about me" he's saying, it's actually about you, and God, and your faithfulness.**" The young man hears that: "I am faithful," he replies, "I have been since my youth."

Do you remember when you've met a young person who's so certain about everything! Age brings less certainty – we recognize how conditional our world is! Jesus loved this young man for his passionate certainty! His response is wisdom: "you have much to learn about life and faith that will challenge your certainty, so here's my gift to you, here's where the learning starts," is what Jesus says. And it is a gift – ***Jesus is saying that loving someone doesn't imply an avoidance of issues, which is so often what happens in all of our lives.*** The gift is to point out that as admirable as the young man's devotional behavior is, it lacks a sense of compassion for the poor. You might say – in terms of the Amos reading – that the young man understood the priestly part of faith, the religious part, but was missing the part about social justice.

The learning begins in that one, simple response. Jesus gently exposes the young man's self-satisfied behavior: "Your wealth is blinding you to the true vision of the kingdom and inhibiting

your compassionate response to the poor.” In this case (hear me: “in this case, *not every case*”) The solution is for the young man to give away all that he has and then to follow Jesus.

Whoa, Nellie! Are you up for that? Or how about a little bit of denial and self-deception? Would that help?

In the end, no. Better for us to acknowledge how hard this saying is than to pretend it doesn't apply to us because – we claim with some justification – we're actually already really good, faithful people! That's not going to work! Jesus gift is for us too, and we owe him a grudging vote of thanks for at least forcing us to face the realities of wealth and poverty in our time.

And here's one of those places where Peter speaks for me, and, I'm guessing, for you to. “Yeah, Peter! Thank you for your grounded realism!” Who, indeed, can be saved if this is the standard?! This is a refreshing honesty that is also a gift. In Peter's willingness to voice his anxieties we're given an example of how to address the anxiety provoked by some of Jesus' sayings. **In that sense, his words are especially valuable for any and all clergy – including me – who think that our role is to suppress our own anxieties around this passage, and offer reasons to you about why Jesus' saying isn't really as blunt as it obviously is.**

So I'm not going to offer you some 'magic bullet' that will explain away what Jesus says here. You'll need to grapple with it yourselves. For myself, I do wonder if suppressing my own inner anxieties around this text also has the effect of suppressing my ability and willingness to be generous toward those in need, and perhaps even leads me to close my ears to their cries.

There you are! I hope that you will find some comfort in the thought that if faith were easy, everyone would be doing it; and – more seriously – that to be faithful is a constant struggle, with a challenging interplay between being priestly – engaging in the rituals and worship of the Church – and being compassionate and generous toward those in need. Both are vital; and they're not, nor should they be, at war with each other!

One last thing, which might sound like a shameless plug for our financial stewardship program, which we're kicking off today, but really isn't (at least I don't think it's shameless!) Wouldn't it be nice if there were sufficient financial resources here at St. Augustine's so that you can invite in a leader who can help prepare you for, and guide you through, the complex morass that is 21<sup>st</sup> Century North American life and culture? To help you see what's essential, what's central, what's life-giving about our common faith, in the context of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world? And then act on that vision as a Christian community? I think so. I hope you do too.