

Pentecost 8/Proper 10. July 15, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85:8-13, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

It's a time of great prosperity. Those at the top, who control so much of what happens, have spent years structuring the nation so that they enrich themselves.

What do you do with all that wealth? Does the phrase "luxury items" come to mind? In the end, it's not so much about owning something, but flaunting it. Throughout history, one of the ways that those who control excessive wealth have lived is to accumulate rare or very expensive items – things not readily available, or things that are always available inexpensively but which, for the wealthy, are made of excessively expensive components.

There has always been wealth disparity. The tipping points have come when it becomes a zero-sum game, when excessive wealth accumulation by the few leads to much deeper impoverishment of the many.

And so it is. And when it is, there are those who object, who call out the wealthy for their excessive actions as immoral, who call their behavior unjust, who say "as sure as night follows day, your actions have consequences."

Whatever you think about what I've said, I'm talking about the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. If you think I'm talking about today, then all I can say is "if the shoe fits....."

Amos – in some ways the angriest of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century prophets – rails against the establishment for their behavior. It's immoral, he says, to import excessively expensive luxury goods – "beds of ivory" (chapter 2), purchased with wealth the Israelite elites have extorted from the people – when perfectly acceptable, cheaper alternatives are available. But no! Only the finest for the powerful. And how are they doing this? They're doing it on the backs of the people who by their actions they have made poor. In fact, not even just poor, but in many cases destitute, homeless, starving, dying. Amos cries out that this is immoral, it's unethical, it's unjust.

And he doesn't pull any punches! He interprets God's deep concern for human injustice in language of judgment and threat: "The lion has roared; who will not fear? / The Lord God has spoken; / who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8) Amos sees himself as proclaiming God's anger.

You don't often hear me talk about God's anger, do you?! It's certainly true, I believe, that the core expression of divine identity is love – a self-giving, sacrificing love. We proclaim that every Sunday. What I don't often do is place any emphasis on God's wrath, God's **demand** for obedience to the divine imperatives of compassion and love. The great German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this love without responsibility and obedience 'cheap grace.'"

Amos is keen to show us that God's love demands righteousness, and breaches of God's call to justice and love cause God grief. As one contemporary theologian has said: "*The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed.*" (James Cone)

What we see in today's reading epitomizes the conflict underpinning everything Amos says. It's a fragment of the conflict between Amos and the high priest Amaziah about the failure in particular of the religious establishment to challenge the immoral behavior of the powerful in Israel. How the religious establishment responds is entirely predictable, it seems to me. They aren't happy with Amos' message, because it's rocking their comfy boat, threatening their institutional stability. So they want him to disappear, to "Get out of Dodge. Amaziah – the Chief Priest, the representative of Organized Religion – expresses his outrage toward Amos' message in vs. 12: "O seer, go, flee away!"

Amos wrote twenty-eight centuries ago, to people in a different culture, a long way from here. Where does that leave us? Well, not off the hook, I'd say! Throughout time, organized religion has often been a supporter of the status quo, including supporting those in positions of great wealth and power (actually that's redundant - great wealth and power go hand-in-hand). That's especially true when those at the top, who control so much of what happens, have spent years structuring the nation so that they enrich themselves – and have succeeded in doing so, and when they reward organized religion for its support.

What's especially insidious is any suggestion that the best course of action is simply to stay quiet. As I asked vestry members last Thursday, if we see something wrong, should we just live with it so as not to rock the boat? If we see systemic injustice, isn't there a divine imperative to respond?

In 1963, in his "letter from Birmingham jail" Martin Luther King Jr. wrote to well-intentioned white clergy who had urged King not to act too quickly, not to push his agenda for racial equality with urgency, and not to employ strategies of civil disobedience. King, in response, called for extremism. He said this:

***"Was not Jesus an extremist for love: '[ Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.]' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream?'"***

King's letter met with resistance by well-meaning religious authorities. ***Yet what he was saying was simply echoing Amos, that religious piety is rendered meaningless by a lack of justice .*** Or, to quote Pelagius, ***"How can you call yourself a Christian [when] you do not act like one?"***

Are we extremists for love? Last week I said that we're all called to be prophets – there are different sorts of prophets; not all of us are called to be an Amos, or a John the Baptist, or a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Martin Luther King Jr. But we are called, in our own lives, in our own ways, to express, by words and actions, God's love in Jesus Christ – a love that can change the world.

If we're not called to be exactly like these prophets, we are called by them at the least to engage in some serious self-reflection. When does our well-meaning, and well-intentioned perspective actually mask inaction? When does our lack of love and commitment to justice render our own religious practices meaningless? In what ways, in our own day, are our religious institutions – the

ones we love – and we, ourselves, damming the waters of justice, and choking the ever flowing streams of righteousness that lie at the heart of our faith?

So much of what's happening in our culture and our nation today directly confronts us with exactly these sorts of questions, and lays down for us what I think is the most compelling question, the one that lies at the center of all religious tradition: just when will we, as people of faith, say "enough is enough" when we see the immorality and lack of love around us AND when will we work more actively to transform it?