

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15

Amos is the second prophet we encounter this summer. However, he is one of the earliest prophets recorded in the Hebrew Bible being active in the 8th century BCE. The book of Amos is a collection of his sayings. The most complete one is found in chapters 1-2. The rest are fragments or smaller sections that have been compiled.

To understand what is going on you need to know that by the time of Amos, the united kingdom of Israel that had existed under King's David and Solomon had now been divided into two. A southern kingdom called Judah with Jerusalem as its capital and a northern kingdom sometimes called Ephraim but also (confusingly) called Israel with its capital at Samaria.

At this moment in time, both kingdoms were doing well economically. King Jeroboam II's kingdom in the north, Israel, was particularly well situated to benefit from the trade between the Mediterranean Sea and the countries of the interior of the Middle East and Asia. It should also be pointed out that Jeroboam had established two places of worship outside of Jerusalem and the Temple there. One at Beth-el (where Amaziah was priest) and one at Dan. This meant that (according to him and his priests) believers did not need to travel to the southern kingdom of Judah to fulfill the covenant. They could stay closer to home. While Amos lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, in a small town just south of Jerusalem, he was sent by God to prophesy in the northern kingdom of Israel, mostly at Beth-el.

We don't know much about Amos himself, we know that he owned or tended a herd of some kind- perhaps he was a smaller landowner- and that he was a "dresser of sycamore trees" which meant that he would bruise the figs on those trees to help them ripen faster. We also know that Amos vehemently denies being a professional prophet and part of a guild. Rather, he claims that God has come to him directly and sent him to Israel to proclaim his message.

That message began with Amos accusing many of the nations surrounding Israel of violence and injustice and proclaimed that God's punishment will fall on them. The Israelites would have readily agreed. But then, Amos turns the tables and indicts the kingdom of Israel as well. It's a similar move to what Nathan does to King David.

Amos points to the wealthy of Israel, beneficiaries of the economic boom times, who ignore the plight of the poor and allow grave injustice in the land, who sell the poor into debt slavery (a legal practice btw) and deny them access to the courts through their corruption of that system. Amos asks them, "Is this the people who were once denied justice and enslaved in Egypt and who God rescued from that injustice and slavery? Are those saved from injustice now inflicting it on others?"

Amos saw this injustice and corruption threatening the very existence of Israel, because the nation was not living up to the conditions of its covenant with God. "You were called by God into covenant. With that calling comes great responsibility, part of which is justice. You have failed at this," Amos says, "and so there are great consequences."

The image Amos uses in our reading today is of a builder whose plumb line, used to see how straight the vertical walls of the building are, shows instead how out of line, off kilter, the walls that make Israel are. Enough to warrant tearing it down and re-building it again.

These words were unbearable to the Israelites. Ones that could not be heard much less accepted (see the promise to Ezekiel last week). So, the Priest Amaziah tells Amos to go and practice his prophecy elsewhere.

The Israelites of Amos' day had come to believe that God's covenant, God's choosing them, was irrevocable. They thought if they just went through the religious motions everything was okay. In fact, most of their actions followed the letter of the Law. As God's mouthpiece, Amos recalls for them that righteousness (being in right relationship with God) is about not only their religious observance, but the way in which they live. It is not just about the letter of the Law, but in how they treat the most vulnerable among them. Specifically, the poor. Professor Robert D Miller II in his paper comparing Amos' concept of Justice to the African concept of Unbuntu, points out that there are more words for "poor" used in the book of Amos and at higher concentration per verse than anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

Throughout the book, Amos connects justice (actions taken to correct injustice) to righteousness (meaning not only right relationship with God, but right relationship within community- equity in spite of social difference). So, to have one, you must have the other. Amos warns the Israelites that their relationship with God is constantly being renewed through fulfillment

by both parties of the terms of the relationship. If you are not righteous, in right relationship with God- but also within community, then the covenant is voided.

Miller points out that Amos does not make calls for equal rights or even ending poverty, but merely that wealth and its distribution must take into account those whose basic needs are at risk of not being met, the poor. The solidarity of righteousness means their poverty is your poverty and cannot be ignored. It means they are as deserving of dignity as you are. That our lives individually are connected communally (this is the core idea of the concept of Unbuntu, btw). That, regardless of what we might think, we need each other. For our own good and for our relationship with God. To fail in that will have dire consequences.

This is a message throughout scripture. Listen to the Psalm for today, what brings prosperity and increase? Steadfast love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace. What does God teach us and model for us? That everyone has enough to live. This is the lesson of the manna in the wilderness. This is what the Lord God is saying to us. But can we bear the hearing of it? Can we look at our society and see with clear eyes how well (or not) we are living this way?

It is hard, when we live in relative privilege, to truly appreciate the challenges faced by the poor in our nation. The utter amount of time and energy it takes to even get assistance when you need it. The hoops to jump through and the various places you need to go. It's a full time job.

How many people just go under before this system can even get moving to help them?

How many of us know these desperate ones among us? Know them as people? It can be scary and difficult. It still is for me and I have been bouncing along the edges of their reality for the last 20 years or so. But I continue to be surprised how that connection, person to person, makes it so much easier. Opens my eyes to see their plight and the plight of others like them in a new way. I was having a conversation with a member the other day who expressed that same reality of how entering into relationship- by sticking with the discomfort and engaging in conversation- led them to see that person in a wholly different way.

Amos is challenging to us today, because he speaks not only or even primarily about our individual responsibility towards the poor and vulnerable of our nation, but our corporate responsibility. He binds this civic question of how we share the wealth of our nation among ourselves, how we care for the poor and vulnerable among us, with our professed devotion to God and being a Godly nation. He reminds us that it is God who came to us while we were yet sinners and freed us, that it is only through the generosity of God that we have our wealth to begin with- that everything belongs to God in the first place- we just keep it for a time. He calls us to live out our own calling to be agents of God's generosity in the world, to care for others in the same way God has cared for us.

To see the truth of ourselves might be unbearable, but the consequences of not doing so could be catastrophic. We can risk it because we know the

kind of God we have. One whose desire is for the restoration of relationship with all people, for everyone to live in right relationship, for everyone to have enough, for justice to flow like streams. God's desire is not to punish but to save. And this is the final word from Amos, that while their mistreatment of the poor will bring about Israel's destruction, God will send from the house of David one who will bring God's reign to all nations. One who will call God's people together again. This is the one who is Jesus. Our savior and Lord.

As people claimed by God through baptism, cleansed by the love of God for us in Jesus Christ who died so that we might live, I pray that we might hear the word of God through Amos, and answer that call to bring justice to the poor of our nation not just through what we do, but how we as a society act. Striving always towards the example God has given us and trusting in God's grace and mercy when we fall short of that striving.

I invite you all to come and be fed this day by the body and blood of Christ, so that we might be given the courage to look at ourselves and our society clearly, but also to be strengthened in our resolve to go forth into this world and be the hands and feet of God feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless. Making sure that all in our society have enough. Bringing God's own justice.