

The Truth & Nothing But the Truth
8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 2024

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator and Sustainer, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit that abides in each of us. Amen.

Amos is truly one of my favorite prophets. Now one of the reasons I like Amos is because he really wasn't a prophet in the typical sense. Amos wasn't born into a religious family. He wasn't dedicated at birth to the temple and raised in the temple like other prophets. In his own words, Amos says, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees," (Amos 7:14). Although we don't know how God called him into service, Amos says "the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:15). Amos was an ordinary guy called by God to do an extraordinary thing.

The second reason I like this prophet so much is because Amos wasn't tied to the religious establishment of his day, nor to the political establishment. He was just a guy who God called to go and speak the truth in the world. And so freed from any ties, except for his tie to God, Amos went and spoke the truth about how the religious and political leadership in the northern kingdom of Israel were not leading with justice, nor were they leading in God's ways.

Amos spoke truths that challenged everyone. He spoke truth about how the wealthy were using the poor to get wealthier. He spoke of how the powerful used their power to hold down those without the power. And he said, "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine" (5:11). Amos said to the rich and powerful, yes you are profiting now at the expense of others, but the day will come because of your transgressions against God and God's ways that you will no longer reap such rewards. Wow, now that took guts!

But Amos didn't stop there. He also challenged the religious establishment, as well. He spoke of how the religious in the community had also become unfaithful to God's ways. Sure you come to worship, he said, but you keep an eye on the time, because you want to get out so you can go make more money, or do something more important. And following these harsh words, he then says to the "religious faithful" God says to you, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:21-24).

As I read these words of Amos to both the secular world and the religious world, I am challenged to look in the mirror. I am challenged to say, Lord, what is my part in this mess that our world has become. Oh, we can deny it, but each of us has played some role in the mess that this world is in, and God is calling us to look in the mirror, claim our part of the mess and then seek change. What God desires most, is not our words of love and praise, is not our commitment to faithful and traditional practices that we all love so much, no, what God desires most is that we seek justice and righteousness in all that we do and that's hard to do. In fact, just hearing Amos' words make me want to crawl in a hole and hide, because I know he is speaking to me.

And as we heard Jesus say last week, when a prophet speaks the truth, the hardest place to speak it is in his/her own home. I know the hardest place for me to talk about the truth of the issues of today is right here, in my own denomination. I get accused of being political and I hear things like I just no longer understand the "real" world. Others come and say, Reverend, I agree, but I just can't talk about those things because I will make people, my family, my friends

uncomfortable. And the truth is, this is all true, but God still says to us, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Speaking the truth is hard to do and often times it gets us in trouble. Amos got kicked out of Israel, and John, as we heard today got killed. Jesus spoke truth and he was crucified, and, yet, God still says to us “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

My friends, as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed The LORD has claimed us while we were still in our mother's womb (Isaiah 49:1) and because we have been claimed by this God of justice, we are called to always seek justice and to always speak God’s truth. We do this not to hurt others, but to proclaim God and God’s love for the world. God cares more about our actions than God cares about our words.

In our Gospel story today, initially Herod is presented as potentially a good guy. The author says that although John had spoken out against Herod’s illegal marriage to his sister-in-law, that still “Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him” (Mark 6:20). And yet, when the truth continued to be spoken boldly, Herod had John killed.

Speaking the truth can be deadly and even worse, hearing the truth can also be deadly. And therein lies another truth. You see, aside from speaking the truth, we are also called to listen to the truth, which for many of us is probably harder than speaking the truth because if we listen and admit to truths about ourselves then we will have to admit that we are also part of the problem. If we admit the truth, we will have to change and that is not what most of us want to do. We want things to stay the way they are because we are comfortable. But as the saying goes, “Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.”

God became flesh, not to make us all feel comfortable that we are loved and saved, but more importantly God became flesh to help us understand that God loves all creation. Yes God loves Americans, but God also loves Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Chinese and people of all nations. God loves the rich, but God also loves the poor. God loves all races, people of all sexual preferences and genders. God loves us and God desires that we share that love with all of creation, even our enemies and to do that, we must speak the truth, listen to the truth and must act upon the truth.

We are also called to insure that the truths that are spoken are true. Let me give you an example. Immigration and the illegal entry of immigrants into this country is a huge issue, and that is true. However, we need to make changes based on the truth, not lies. Now one of the big reasons we are told that we need to fix this problem is that “illegal immigrants” are increasing crime rates in this country. But the truth is, this isn’t the truth. Research done in the past several years show that undocumented immigrants are considerably less likely to commit crime than native-born citizens, with immigrants legally in the United States even less likely to do so. So the truth is, our crime problem in this county has nothing to do with immigration. In fact, research has shown that states with larger shares of undocumented immigrants tended to have lower crime rates than states with smaller shares in the years 1990 through 2014.

My friends, the Gospels news today is that we are called to be a people of the truth and nothing but the truth. If we are ever going to be a people that “let’s justice flow like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” then we as people of faith need to speak the truth, listen to the truth, share the truth, and act upon the truth. May it be so, Amen.

Comments about immigration from Sept. 27, 2021, article from Cato Institute: <https://www.carnegie.org/our-work/article/15-myths-about-immigration-debunked/> and from May 29, 2024 article from Brennan Center for Justice, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/debunking-myth-migrant-crime-wave?ms=gad_illegal%20immigrant%20crime_700983500566_8628877148_163578260112&gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw_hb60BhClARIsABGGtw90QzN7UYv323FLGrOu7KB1w_mOxZxyTf7ORC4-3kow9AxWOAe54SkaAgajEALw_wcB