

Sermon for July 10, 2016: The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Peter C. Siwek
Grace Church, Oak Park

The Prophet Amos lived in the Kingdom of Israel in the middle of the 8th century, B.C. At that time, Israel, along with all the Middle East, was part of the Assyrian Empire. During Amos's lifetime, though, the Assyrian army was spending significant resources battling with Israel's neighbors to the north. For the Jewish people, this relative stability allowed the wealthy to become even wealthier through trade. Most of the farmland was turned over to wine and olive oil production - almost all of it for export. The land could hardly sustain the actual farm workers, who became poorer and poorer.

For Amos, such a state of affairs was not only an economic disaster, but an ethical and spiritual one, as well. Amos declared:

These are words of the Lord: For crime after crime of Judah I shall grant them no reprieve, because they have spurned the law of the Lord and have not observed his decrees; they have been led astray by the same false gods their fathers followed. Therefore I shall send fire on Judah, fire to consume the palaces of Jerusalem.

These are the words of the Lord: For crime after crime of Israel I shall grant them no reprieve, because they sell honest people for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They grind the heads of the helpless into the dust, and push the humble out of the way.
 (Amos 2:4-7)

As Amos said further on, **"This is an evil time."** (Amos 5:13) It was so evil, that almost any sense of God's righteousness among the Jewish People was forgotten or ignored. So God, in a vision, shows Amos a plumb line.

It's such a simple builder's tool, about as simple as could be: a little metal weight, attached to a long string. You hold it up; the weight stretches the string; and the line that the string makes is always perfectly upright. It's a tool that will never fail.

So, in Amos's vision: There is God, standing by a wall. And because that wall was built with a plumb line, it is solid, upright, and secure. The word for 'wall', in Hebrew, is *chomah*; and this word is related to the words for 'mother', or 'mother-in-law'. God is standing by this wall, a wall built by the righteousness and uprightness of God, and it is a wall of heartfelt, loving protection for the Kingdom of Israel. God built this wall to protect and preserve his people, so that they might pursue righteousness all their days.

But, as Amos said, "It is an evil time." God takes his plumb line of righteousness, and now measuring the uprightness of the Israelites, reveals how corrupt they are. God then declares the Kingdom of Israel unworthy of his wall of protection. Desolation awaits.

Now, no prophet has ever gotten away with speaking like this for very long. It is no surprise that a religious big shot like Amaziah - a priest of the King's sanctuary, no less - would try to silence Amos. Power, politics and privilege have always sought to silence the prophets of God. And Amos says something that is a bit of good news, as we struggle with the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, and with the killings of police officers in Dallas by a sniper during a Black Lives Matter gathering. Here's is what Amos says:

"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' (Amos 5:14-15).

Here's the glimmer of good news: Amos was an ordinary person. And God used his voice, his life, to speak God's truth in evil times.

Keep ordinary Amos, called by God, close by. As our nation struggles with the demons of racism in human hearts and institutions, Amos's way is our way forward. And Amaziah's way is not.

And what I must say now, will most likely be unpleasant to many of you. What I must say now, I say to the White folks in the room: As White people, we have taken the way of Amaziah, and not of Amos. As White people, we have taken Amaziah's way into our hearts and into our minds; and it is Amaziah's way that even preserves the safety of our bodies. Because Amaziah's way is not just about Amaziah as an individual; Amaziah is privileged and powerful because Amaziah is part of a predatory social system. The poor are not Amaziah's problem. The oppressed are not Amaziah's problem. He has no motivation to help them, or to stand with them, or to suffer alongside them, as Amos does. Amaziah has the uncommonly good luck of not having to care, at all.

White people can, without any repercussions, enjoy the uncommonly good luck of Amaziah. We can see - literally see! - the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, and turn away. But we are just starting to see that Amaziah's way - in this evil time - is making some White people's hearts ache more and more to seek the way of Amos.

And even by **seeking** the way of Amos with good will and compassion, we reveal our racial privilege. For People of Color in this nation, living the way of Amos is an existential necessity, and it's been that way for centuries. By **seeking** the way of Amos, White people are trying to catch up to the prophetic witness, grace, courage and endurance that God has granted People of Color for generations, even unto this evil time.

Now: I'm speaking to everyone in the room.

After watching the video-recorded police slayings of Alton Sterling and of Philando Castile this week, ordinary people once again desperately asked, "What can I do about this? What can we do about this?"

According to the Prophet Amos, here's the Big Picture Answer:

"Seek good, and not evil, that you may live, that the Lord, the God of Hosts, may be with you, as you claim he is. Hate evil, and love good: establish justice in the courts; it may be that the Lord, the God of Hosts, will show his favor." (Amos 5:14)

Here's the Big Picture Answer that Jesus approved:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27-28)

Such a clear teaching! As easy to understand as a plumb line revealing whether we are crooked or upright. The same goes for the well-loved parable of the Good Samaritan. Everyone understands it.

Or do we?

Shortly after the Charleston Church Massacre, which took place just over a year ago, (can you believe it?) African-American writer John Metta addressed the all-white congregation of Bethel Congregational Church of Christ in White Salmon, Washington. Before he spoke, the Parable of the Good Samaritan was read. Here's a bit of what John said about it:

I don't like the story of the Good Samaritan. Everyone likes to think of themselves as the person who sees someone beaten and bloodied and helps him out. That's too easy.

If I could re-write that story, I'd rewrite it from the perspective of Black America. What if the person wasn't beaten and bloody? What if it wasn't so obvious? What if they were just systematically challenged in a thousand small ways that actually made it easier for you to succeed in life?

Would you be so quick to help then? Or would you, like most White people, stay silent and let it happen?

...White people are in a position of power in this country because of racism. The question is: Are they brave enough to use that power to speak against the system that gave it to them?

So I'm asking you to help me. Notice this. Speak up. Don't let it slide. Don't stand watching in silence. Help build a world where it never gets to the point where the Samaritan has to see someone bloodied and broken.¹

¹ John Metta, I, Racist: Why I don't talk race with White people, <https://thsppl.com/i-racist-538512462265#.q2b8kq7a1>

A year later, and there is even more blood and more brokenness. Ordinary people are still asking, “What can *I* do, what can ***we*** do, about the evil of racism in our country?” And in any number of ways, we know what we could do - but we don’t do it.

In the face of such Sin, Evil and Death, the Church must ask a different question, one which is actually ***defines*** what you and I, what all of us, can do. We must ask the question that is, for Christians, an ***existential necessity***. We must ask: “***What is God doing*** about the poison of racism in our country?”

Such a question, in the secular world, will get us mocked. But I am completely serious. In the same way that White people could spend the rest of their lives listening to the experience of People of Color, so it is that ***all of us*** can spend the rest of our days listening for what the Spirit of God is doing in our midst about the evil of racism in our nation. And as the Spirit of God gives us the grace to listen, the same Spirit of God is firing up the grace for us to act. Do not sin against the Holy Spirit and turn away! The Spirit of God calls forth ordinary people to speak like the Prophet Amos, long ago; the Spirit of God sets before us the plumb line of righteousness; and the same Spirit will create in our hearts such a hatred of evil, that we will love God and our neighbors all the more.

Even in this evil time, Christ Crucified and Risen says to us all:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And then, Jesus tells us, ordinary people,

**“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.**

**Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

(Matthew 5:1-12).

Amen.

The Sunday's Scripture Readings

Amos 7:7-17

This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' "Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and

may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."