

Proper 23 B 2021

October 10, 2021 :: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Mark 10:17-31

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“Trusting the Right Thing.”

The job of a prophet, like Amos in our first reading, was never easy. For example, when God called Amos to be a prophet to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, there were a couple of things working against him.

First, Amos was a shepherd. That means he lacked the necessary *bona fides* that would enable him to bring a message — purportedly from God — to the rich and powerful citizens of Israel. I mean, try to imagine a mail-room clerk of a rich and powerful corporation, being called (again purportedly) by God to advise the founder and CEO of that corporation that he had made mistakes, that he’d made wrong decisions. That’s a tough row to hoe.

And, second, God called Amos to be a prophet at a time when the rich and powerful citizens of Israel were feeling secure in their relationship to God, because they believed that their good fortune — their riches and power — were clear evidence of God’s favor over their lives.

But it's into that setting that Amos is called to go. And his unhappy task is to try to persuade some very comfortable, and very self-assured people, that they were mistaken. That the conclusions they were drawing from their prosperity were wrong. And when things are going really well for a group of people, it's hard to convince them that they need to change the direction of their lives. But this is precisely what Amos had to do.

Now, there are many themes woven throughout the Old Testament, but the most important may be that of God's covenant with his people. And the basis of that covenant was this: The people were to conform to a certain standard of behavior, as described in the Ten Commandments. And by living according to the Commandments, they would be able to form a society whose foundation was equity, generosity, justice, and righteousness. (And, in case there was any doubt, this is precisely what Jesus was referencing when he later talked about the kingdom of God). And God's role in that covenant was to be always present with his people, to help them to live according to the Commandments, and help them achieve an abundant life. To help them, in other words, to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Now, we need to remember that a covenant is *not* a contract. A contract is: If you paint my house, I will pay you a certain amount of money. In a contract, one action is contingent upon another action. If you *don't* paint my house, you *don't* get paid. A covenant, however, is a pledge, a promise. And in God's covenant with his people, God's pledge is unconditional; that is, he will do what he promised, regardless of what his people do, or don't do.

Now, if I were a really cynical person — which I can be sometimes, but I'm not now — I would say that God got the short end of that covenantal stick. Because the Old Testament is full of examples of the people of Israel, time and time again, not holding up their end of the covenant. And when that happened, God would send a messenger — like the prophet Amos — to alert the people to the fact that they were on the wrong track, and to invite and encourage them back into the covenant; back to what they originally promised.

But here's the thing: Over time, the people of Israel somehow began to reinterpret their covenant with God as a contract. That is, they began to believe that if they conformed to God's standards of behavior, that God would respond to their obedience, and bless

them with abundance and peace. The other side of that coin, however, was the belief that if they were disobedient, God would punish them.

And so, Amos is called by God to talk to a prosperous and secure people. He is called to proclaim a message, to a people who believe they're *already* doing what God wants them to be doing. And the message Amos is to declare is that, regardless of their good fortune — despite the fact that they are building “houses of hewn stone” and planting “pleasant vineyards” — that they will not be able to enjoy the fruits of their good fortune for very much longer. And why is this? Because their good fortune was gained at the expense of the poor, and weak, and vulnerable.

“Because you trample on the poor,” Amos tells them, “and take from them levies of grain,” you will not live in those fine homes you’ve built, nor will you drink the wine from the beautiful vineyards you’ve planted. And why is that? Well, it’s *not* because God is going to punish them. Rather, it’s because — *and this is a foundational truth about human societies* — it’s because a society that allows people to become rich and powerful, on the backs of the poor and weak, is a society that will not long stand.

And this is the message that the unfortunate Amos was tasked to deliver to the very comfortable, and very confident, and very self-assured citizens of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Which brings us to the reading from Mark's gospel. There, a rich man comes to Jesus and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" After brushing aside the man's obvious flattery, Jesus reminds him of the last six commandments — don't commit murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't give false testimony, don't defraud, honor parents. And immediately the man says, "I have kept all these since my youth."

Now, an endearing aspect of this story is the fact that Jesus looked at that man and "loved him." Because standing before Jesus was a man who was well-intentioned, and eager to do what was right, but who was sadly misinformed as to what the right thing was. "You lack one thing," Jesus says to the rich young man. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Now, there are many ways we can interpret this, but in the light of Amos' prophetic words, let's consider the following. This

rich (and, therefore, powerful) man had all the outward signs of what his culture believed was evidence of God's favor. However, he was living under the misconception that his relationship with God was a contractual relationship, rather than a covenant relationship. That is, he must be a good man because he has all these good things. And so, Jesus is trying to bring that man back to a place where his relationship with God is based upon a covenant. Jesus is trying to take that man to a place where he actually looks to God's *promise* and *pledge* — and not to his possessions — for his peace and security. Jesus is trying to take that man to a place where he understands that God's favor can't be acquired by human effort; to understand that God's favor is a gift, pure and simple.

But old habits are hard to break, and when the rich man heard the advice of Jesus, he went away, sad and grieving. He was afraid to give up all of the *things* that made him feel secure. He was afraid to give away all those things that made him *think* that he was acceptable to God. He was afraid, in short, to trust in the promises of God. His faith, in other words, in the trustworthiness of God, and in the ability of God to meet all his needs, was simply not up to the task.

“How hard it will be,” Jesus then said, “for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” How hard it is, for people who have learned to trust in *things* as proof of their acceptability to God. How hard it is to believe that we can be welcomed into God’s presence, on no other merit other than the fact that we have a pulse and respiration. How hard it is to believe that there isn’t *anything* that we must do, or believe, or feel, or proclaim, in order to feel God’s embrace.

How hard it is, for those who forget that God did *not* choose the people of Israel, because they were the most exceptional among all the other cultures; He chose them because they were the *least* exceptional. How hard it is, for those who forget that Jesus did not die for the righteous; He died for all of us, even when we were still in the muck of our sinfulness and selfishness. How hard it is, for those who forget that God gave us his favor for no other reason than love. God looked upon the people of Israel and he loved them. God in Christ looked at that rich man and he loved him. And God looks at each of us, and God loves us. We are loved for no other reason other than the fact that God is love.

How hard it is, to believe that we are loved, and more, that we are lovable. How hard it is, to believe that there is nothing that we need to do earn God's favor; to earn God's smile upon our lives; to earn, at the last day, the divine pronouncement, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

When I became a father, and I held my child in my arms, I discovered within me a love that surprised me. I loved her so much. And yet, she had done nothing to engender that tremendous love I felt for her. She was a baby; she required constant attention. It's hard work to be a parent. And yet I loved her so much. I'd do anything for her. I'd go to any length to keep her safe; to keep her from harm.

And then, one day, this thought occurred to me: that God's love for humanity looks a lot like a parent's love for their children. Except that God's love is a gazillion times bigger. And anything a mom or dad is willing to do for their children, God is willing to do so much more. And not because we've done anything to earn it or deserve it, but simply because it's in God's nature and character to love us.

But then I became a grandfather. And, one day, when Max was about four months old something remarkable happened. He had just learned to roll over, and he would traverse an entire room simply by rolling over. Well, one evening, he needed his diaper changed. So I placed him on the changing table — where he immediately tried to roll over, which would have meant rolling *off* the table — so I placed a hand firmly on his chest, keep him in place. To keep him safe. Let me tell you, Max got so frustrated and so angry with me that his cry had a vibrato. Well, at some point in the process of changing him, I paused to look at his screaming red face and thought, “My God, I love this boy so much!”

And that’s when it occurred to me, that this is what God’s *grace* is like. That, no matter how well we’re behaving, or even how poorly we’re behaving, when God looks at us — like Jesus looking at that rich man — God loves us.

How hard it is to accept all this. But I think this is *precisely* what God would have us believe. And this is precisely what God would have us embrace. And this is precisely how God would have us live. Now, and always. Amen.