

their
Proper 20
Year C 2016
Amos 8:4-7

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Amos offers compelling words to the people of Israel.

A wholesale condemnation of their behavior
which stands in opposition to the nature and
laws of the God of Israel.

Amos was one of the 8th century prophets called by God
to prophesy to the those who had gone astray.

Now Amos was not from the school of prophets,
not a professional prophet,
so to speak.

Amos was a sheep herder
and a sycamore fig farmer
until that fateful day
when God called upon Amos to become a prophet.

So Amos empowered by God,
imbued with the Word of God
to be proclaimed to the people,
went forth and became one of God's prophets.

Amos was active in the middle of the 8th century before Christ during the reign of Jeroboam II.

He was from the southern Kingdom of Judah but preached in the northern Kingdom of Israel.

Amos wrote at a time of relative peace and prosperity but also of neglect of God's laws.

He spoke against an increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor.

The 8th century prophets were intently focused on reminding the people of Israel of God's justice.

In fact, the 8th century prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Micah were in one accord about the Lord's demand for justice:

Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good,
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:16d-17)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

These prophets acted in ways similar to today's ACLU, Human Rights Watch, Greenpeace and Sierra Club, if you see what I mean.

At the heart of their message was their understanding that justice starts with the very character of God.

That justice is part of the Lord's nature

From Isaiah: "The Lord is a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:18)

God's justice is a social concept -- it has to do with the ordering of society in which the most life can flourish.

God's justice is also a legal concept as set out in detail in the Book of Deuteronomy.

See God has gone to painstaking lengths to insure that the people of God are aware of God's desire and demand for justice.

And in particular, justice requires a special concern for the powerless --those who lack the capacity to protect their own welfare.

Throughout the Old Testament the "powerless" are often identified as the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the afflicted, the needy, and the poor.

In this week's lesson, Amos condemns practices that "trample the needy" and "ruin the poor."

The people of Israel had not gone so far as to neglect their ritual duties of keeping festivals and the Sabbath day.

Their words seemed to honor God but their hearts were far from God.

The rich could not wait to open up their stores and businesses as soon as the Sabbath was over.

The traders made the ephah small and the shekel great.

The ephah was a measure but they didn't give full measure when they were weighing out the grain and they overcharged for what they sold.

They defrauded with false scales.

It is easy to forget that the Sabbath day was not first-and-foremost about a time for worship, but rather was originally a justice law designed to give rest to all of society-- not just to the property owner, but also "your ox and your donkey, and your livestock, and the resident alien in your towns" (Deuteronomy 5:14).

In these sabbatical laws, the poor and wild animals are provided with food (Exodus 23:10-11), slaves are released to freedom after six years (Deuteronomy 15:12-18), those in deep debt are forgiven their debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11), and so on.

Again, God desires justice for all in order that all might flourish.

But in Amos' day, the justice sense of the laws had been lost.

The poor were driven by debt
to sell themselves and there were those
who were buying their brothers and sisters
for silver or for a pair of sandals.

So much for the forgiveness of debts!

All of this seems to make a clear
and obvious case for the fact
that God is justice, desires justice
and commands his people to adhere to
a concept of justice in which all can flourish.

But why?

Now this may sound like a peculiar question
but really, why?

Of course God wants all of God's people
to thrive, excel and flourish seems the obvious response.

But God is not just a humanist
so what's being hidden in plain view
in this belief.

God wants **all people** to flourish
because God has created
all humanity for each other.

We have been created for each other.

God has created each of us with specific gifts, talents, treasures, and spirits to complement each other.

We are created for each other and justice is the means by which we insure that all are equally able to thrive.

In a just society, in God's world, there is no room for less than.

"Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life."

— Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa

We have been created for each other and God calls us to insure that each and every one of us is afforded dignity and respect.

This is our call, this is our covenant with God.

We currently live in a society which is growing farther and farther apart in a number of areas:
economically,
housed and unhoused,
racially,
incarcerated and unincarcerated,
resident and nonresident,
and loved and unloved.

My friends, if we continue on this course, we surely will destroy the very best that God has given us.

We must turn our hearts and minds away from the siren call of fear and anxiety and instead turn again to the heartbeat of God which resides in all creation.

This is not to say that everyone we encounter or every situation we encounter will be comfortable .
I certainly hope not.

We cannot grow and thrive if we are never challenging ourselves to live more fully and more fearlessly.

But we cannot let fear of the unknown
rule our hearts and minds.

We are knit of the same cloth
by the one loving, living,
eternal God.

The God who has made us for each other.

In the words of Father Greg Boyle,
a Jesuit priest who works and lives
in the midst of numerous gangs in Los Angeles:

No daylight to separate us.

Only kinship.

*Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God
might recognize it.*

Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion.

*Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves
closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased.*

We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied.

We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless.

At the edge, we join the easily despised and the readily left out.

We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop.

We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.

The prophet Habakkuk writes, "The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment and it will not disappoint and if it delays, wait for it."

Kinship is what God presses us on to, always hopeful that its time has come.