

Proper 23 2006

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Heb 3:1-6

Mark 10: 17-27

Amos was a prophet of the 8th century before the common era, B.C.E. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea and Micah. Amos lived in Judah but went up to Israel, as a messenger of God, and the message is a profound judgment on the injustice sanctioned by the chosen people. Amos (5:2-24) puts it this way: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beast I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

The prophetic works in the Bible include the "former prophets" constituted by the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings and the latter prophets as the scrolls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve of which Amos is one of the 12. All of the prophetic writings in Scripture are a passionate engagement for justice in society. Prophetic writings describe God's judgment and God's promise of restoration. The purpose of the prophetic writings is to protect the community of faith from surrendering to the vagaries of historical circumstances and seeing with eyes of faith, God present in the past, present, and future.

The book of Amos is dated around 752 BCE during a prosperous period in both the northern and southern kingdom. The immense prosperity enjoyed in both kingdoms was based however on a disastrous practice of the rich against the poor that was sure to be unsustainable. It is the burden of the prophet to assert the illegitimacy of such social practice and to anticipate a coming judgment from God. In historical terms the Assyrian devastation is taken to be such a judgment. Even the chosen people of Israel will be held accountable to the Lord of justice and righteousness.

Jesus also taught that it is difficult to have great riches and be a faithful disciple. The analogy of the camel going through the eye of the needle is instructive if we know that the eye of the needle was a rock formation that required a camel to bend and crawl along on its knees to get through the structure. We associate being on our knees with

humility. Great wealth is a trust given us by God and we are accountable to God for what we do with it. If the children of the first covenant are called to account for the injustice in their society, so also will those of the new covenant be accountable to the Son of the Father. We dare not think that the words of Amos don't apply to us today: let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is an imperative we ignore at our own peril.

The world seems so unfair. Everywhere there are contrasts between rich and poor, well and sick, happy and unhappy, good and bad, and we plead with God to make things better. What did God have in mind in creating a system in which such pain and plenty could exist side by side? One answer to that question is found in the person of Jesus. Jesus made it his business to care for the sick, the poor, the outcast, and marginalized. If Jesus is the example we seek to follow, we will find it our job to make our community, our society, our nation, our world a place in which fairness and justice flourish. We are called to be actively involved in leveling up the playing field.

Our concerns are all too often only on ourselves and those close to us; our friends, our family, our faith community. The needs of the others, whoever they are, get second or lesser priority. If we would see the poor, the outcasts, the sick as our primary focus, we would enter into a ministry of giving, not taking, of sharing and caring with our vision focused outward.

Justice is not a simple case of the haves giving to the have-nots. It is seeing every other person as brothers and sisters in Christ, as members of God's family. We want the best for our family – so the challenge is to enlarge our concept of family. We want the best education, health care, food, shelter for our family, so if any of the larger family of God are victims of oppression, evil, hunger, or disease, we ought to care about their plight as much as we care about our "genetic family unit." It is our business to be where there is pain and suffering, opposing systems of injustice, working with all our strength to create justice, even when the increments of change are minuscule. We are called to help make God's kingdom come on earth, to bring about justice for all of God's children.

If Amos were in this pulpit today, it is likely that he would remind us that 6.2 billion people live on the planet Eucharistic Prayer C calls "our island home" and 1.2

billion of us live on less than \$1 a day. Among the worlds poor, 70% are female. It is true that 820 million people lack enough food to live healthy productive lives and 160 million children are malnourished, and 6 million children under the age of 5 die every year as a result of hunger. Every day in the developing world more than 30,000 children die from preventable and treatable causes such as diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, measles, and malaria. Half a million women die unnecessarily from pregnancy related complications every year. Poverty, particularly for women is more than income deficiency. Women continue to lag behind men in most societies. Lacking equivalent education, positions in government and subject to violence perpetrated by domestic partners, women suffer poverty disproportionately in comparison with men.

It is fairly common to hear about poverty in some country far away, those whose lives are not next door, whose hunger may appear for a few seconds on television or in newspapers, but that is not “our” family. In the United States, 34 million people live in poverty; 12 million children in the US live in poverty. In our nation’s capital, Washington D.C., 28.5% of children under age 4 live below the poverty line. The majority of poor children live in families where one or more persons worked full time. Overall the child poverty rate in the US is 26.3%, second only to Russia among industrial nations. In contrast in the Czech Republic and Scandinavia child poverty is less than 5%. It is not only the children who are vulnerable in our wealthy society; it is also the elderly. In 2000, the population of citizens in the US age 65 or older reached 35 million. One in ten of these elderly citizens live in poverty (3.4 million as of 2000). Too many elderly must choose between medicine and heat. Poverty is a threat to health as illustrated in the fact that 43 million American citizens lack health insurance.

The God of the Bible is on the side of the poor and the oppressed! Christ’s presence among the lowly and the afflicted is a doctrine drawn from the very heart of the Gospels.

The 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church joined with others in the Anglican Communion in a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals because they are at the heart of the Church’s mission....a world that is free of poverty...a world that is more like God’s intended will for it...because we are called to build up the reign of God in this world.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) consists of 8 strategic goals to reduce global poverty. 191 nations (including the USA) have signed on to the MDG, which asks for .7% of income be dedicated to the relief of poverty. In the Episcopal Church, USA, 35 dioceses including Maryland have made the pledge. Through Episcopal Relief and Development, successful programs are in place throughout the world that addresses the goals. The Episcopal Public Policy Network is lobbying the US government to devote more resources to meeting the goals. We have the resources, the knowledge, to make a difference if and only if we have the will to do so. The pastoral letter from the presiding bishops of the Episcopal and Lutheran Churches in the US are sponsoring the ONE Campaign. ONE is the campaign to make poverty history, a movement of 2.3 million Americans, who are united behind the promise of the Millennium Development Goals.

We may wonder what one person can do in the face of such overwhelming odds in the face of global injustices today. The ONE program takes seriously the voices of each of us. Using email, making calls to members of Congress, writing letters to newspapers, are ways one person can advocate on behalf of the poor. Everyone can do something, even if we don't have extra money to offer, we can offer our voice. The ONE Campaign is the United States' strategy for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. There are more than 70 major humanitarian organizations represented in the ONE Campaign. Instead of speaking one by one we unite into ONE voice with greater affect.

Churches are good at charity, but if we would build a more just society, we would not need so much charity. It is interesting to consider whether charity is only partially for the other and partially for the giver to feel superior. Why we do what we do is important in our spiritual maturation. Do you give to get or gain merit points for admission to the heavenly courts or do you give because all that you have is from God and you know that all of God's children are your brothers and sisters?

Every Sunday we pray, "thy kingdom come" without examining what we are doing to be God's hands and feet and eyes and voice today. A prayer written by St. Francis of Assisi before a crucifix where he experienced a call to work more diligently for reconciliation captures the meaning of praying for the coming of the kingdom. "Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me, Lord, a right faith, a

certain hope, a perfect charity. Give me Lord, wisdom, and discernment, so that I may carry out your true and holy will. Amen.”