

Justice Flowing Community
Narrative Lectionary
November 12, 2017

Amos 1: 1-2, 5: 14-15, 21-24

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When I was in Seattle for the Leadership in the New Parish program, we spent a day out in some communities, neighbourhoods, experiencing folk who were forming community in their neighbourhood and looking to address issues in the community. One area we went to was Aurora, in Northwest Seattle, an area divided by a major thoroughfare. It has been a place for cheap motels and experienced much transients over the years. It has also developed a lot of prostitution and with it addiction issues. The people we met, were living in the community and began to connect with their neighbours. A house church emerged and a few things they began with was a community garden and hosting BBQ's for the neighbours. All were welcome and they began to know the community, both those who lived in houses in the area and those who were living on the streets and prostituting. Their worshipping community emerged from and was integrated with working in and being with those in the neighbourhood.

This is what was missing in the Temple worship of Amos' time. The community Amos lived in was surrounded by poverty, injustice and corrupt systems. Although ancient Israel enjoyed extraordinary political power and economic prosperity, neither the power nor the economic resources were distributed equitably among the populations of the small nation. On the contrary, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, ruling elites who controlled the government. Amos witnessed wealth flowing from the working, peasant class to support the luxurious lifestyle of a few politically powerful elites. The rich became richer, and the poor became poorer. In this context, the worshipping community of the Temple were focused on the rituals, offerings, and festivals but did nothing to address their injustices or help the poor that surrounded them. The festivals and rituals were an important part of the faith and tradition that God had provided for them. However, they also were intended to transform the worshippers to be concerned about those in need and work to address the injustices around them. Thus, Amos' message of God's disdain for their rituals, festivals, offerings, and songs, is directly connected to how meaningless they had become for the people. They were not living out their faith, only going through the motions.

Amos informs them that God wants justice to flow like a mighty river and righteousness like an everflowing stream. God's justice involves bringing people into a right relationship with Yahweh and each other, and these right relationships produce right behavior—righteousness. Right relationship is about honouring who people are along with their story. We talk about right relationship with indigenous people, and this is what reconciliation is about. Knowing their stories, experience, and our role in their history. It is about being with, building relationship and sharing with each other. Justice is different than fairness. It is not everyone having an equal amount. Justice is where the hungry receive more than those who are full and already have enough. Justice is where everyone receives the same medical care, but where those who are sick or injured get all the care they need, and those who are healthy get their annual checkup. Justice is about recognizing there is enough for all, and making sure everyone has access to what they need. Amos says God wants this kind of justice to flow steady and strong, and righteousness to be present in our lives and community continually.

On this day as we honour Remembrance Day, it is about working for peace as we remember the devastation and sacrifices of war. I remember as a teenager, we had a Christian Education worker at the church, and she had a poster on her office door, without Justice there can be no Peace. Peace and justice go hand in hand. In order to truly have peace, there must be right relationship, a lack of injustice and oppression. This is the calling of Amos.

In Aurora, Seattle, out of the relationships that were built with the poor and homeless in the area, the Aurora Commons was born. They noticed in the winter, the rainy season, there was nowhere for the people of the community to gather for their BBQ's and other activities, as the homeless were not comfortable in other people's homes. Then just up the road a run down storefront came up for lease. The church community purchased it and together they fixed it up. It became the Aurora Commons, a drop in centre that is much more than that. As we listened to one of the coordinators, Lisa Etter-Sparrow talk about the Commons, I was struck that she referred to the folk who came to use the space, as friends. They were her friends first and they created the space together. It includes a kitchen area where the folk can come in and share meals which empowers them to choose their own food and share with others. The people there give you a real sense of what it is about in this video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRx_3Dfj4VI

“we need you guys...and actually you need us too”. I love that! They have a few simple guiding principles posted on the wall which are their only rules that all take ownership for. The programs they offer have emerged out of being in relationship with those in need. She told us it is not a church program it is a ministry that emerged from a few folk in the church and got support from others in the church community. This is a community where justice flows out of their worshipping community. It is the kind of community Amos was referring to.

As we reflect on this message from Amos we can think about how our worship transforms us to act in our communities, in our lives to bring justice and righteousness. You might stand up for someone who is being insulted or bullied; or call someone out who makes a racist, sexist, or homophobic joke. You might spend time at an agency working with those in need or volunteer at the hospital, or IMCF. You might join a protest for peace and justice, or stand with our Muslim neighbours when they feel at risk of attack or be involved in multi-faith ministry. You might walk in the annual Pride Parade supporting LGBT folk in our community.

There are many ways we can live out our faith. God calls us to create a worshipping and faith community that transforms us to live justice and righteousness which flows out of us as an extension of God’s love. May we continue to do our best to do so as we seek to live faithfully.