

15 July
Amos 7: 7 - 15
Whitsuntide VIII

Silence in the face of evil IS evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

The Common Lectionary that we and a number of other denominations share, has an alternate first reading for this morning, a reading from the seventh chapter of the prophecy of Amos. I have chosen to use it for two reasons. The primary reason is that even though it is nearly 2800 years old, the words are timeless and speak to our generation. A secondary reason is that it more closely ties with our gospel about prophets who speak truth to power, and fearlessly deliver a warning to the people.

We'll begin with Amos, for we know that he lived in the southern Kingdom of Judah after David and Solomon's empire fell apart. We know that he was not a religious leader, but a shepherd watching sheep and tree surgeon - a dresser of sycamore trees, to be more exact. His occupation gave him time to think, and perhaps to share some of his ideas with the others with whom he worked. Sometimes being in a solitary occupation. God placed a heavy burden on his heart - the horrible abuse of other people, especially the poor, the people pushed to the margins, and their children. As a very good friend said when she was five years old, "There is so much pain in the world." That applied in Amos's age; it applies today.

God was speaking to Amos, but I have a sense that the many people who heard him were thinking he was just a cranky old man who needed to lighten up.

The kingdom of Israel had become powerful, wealthy, and influential, but not everyone was benefitting. Very likely the wealthy took a few verses from the Torah out of context, complimenting and justifying themselves that they were very well off because God had blessed them for their righteousness. And, in turn, cast a disparaging look at the poor and hungry, shook their heads, and said, "Well, they're only getting what they deserve."

Amos' spiritual burden grew heavier and heavier, and yet, instead of retreating farther from the world, God gave him the courage and nudge. He put down his tools and walked from the southern kingdom of Judah to temple or shrine at Bethel. There he gave his one and only sermon - and you have read and heard part of it this morning. We start on the 7th chapter; the indictments began in the 5th chapter. And that is your homework for the week - read this short book of Amos.

It is, of course, very metaphoric language, but he creates images that make a point - trampling on the head of the poor, selling the poor for the price of a pair of sandals, taking their leisure without a thought about the needs of others. They go through the motions of religious ceremony and ritual, making their sacrifices, without giving a thought to what it means.

Against all of this inhumanity to man, God is standing like a master builder at a construction site. He gets out his plumb line and bob to see if the workmen had made the wall straight. God is horrified and livid at what the people

have created and built. It is crooked. As for all of those people who were gleefully and eagerly waiting for God to start smiting and smoting all of those foreign evil-doers, they are in for a horrible surprise. God isn't going to let even his own chosen people get away with it for much longer. There will be a very costly punishment for the heartless treatment of the poor.

The religious leadership was livid. Get out! Go back where you came from! You have no business coming here and speaking in that way! How dare you lecture US about righteousness, and in God's house, no less. You're a nobody from nowhere!" The priests hurried to tattle to the king, insisting that Amos had to be banished from their country and from their shrine. The king agreed, and Amos was sent packing back across the border. And frankly, there is nothing lower than a snitch, a tattle-tale.

This is an uncomfortable book. One sermon, and yet thirty centuries later, we still have it in front of us. Those who are uncomfortable with the message, and would prefer not to think about it too much, can say it is an historical document. Really? The book has remained with us because the message is relevant in every nation of every era. Then we come to the story of John the Baptist. John was not an easy man, nor perhaps a pleasant one. Unlike Amos, John was born into a priestly family, but he had walked away from the comforts of an upper class and respectable life in Jerusalem to live in the Judean wilderness. Like the Old Testament prophets he warned about God's wrath for the inhumane treatment of the poor and people shoved unceremoniously out of the way. Well, that made him a pain to the leaders.

Where he got into serious trouble when he said the real cause of this despicable and deplorable behaviour is at the top - King Herod. He was a king in a dynasty that had no legitimate claim on the throne, an opportunist, a con artist and engaged in all sorts of immorality, including today, the sexual abuse of his step daughter.

This abuse of women is a recurring theme in the Bible - from Abraham ordering his wife to tell Pharaoh that he, Abraham, was her brother, not her husband, to King David's son getting away with incest simply because David liked the young man, on to this story in the Gospels. Evil doers do not want to be exposed, and those in positions of great power can commit murder to cover their tracks.

That is one reason we must, absolutely must, rigorously attempt to live out the promises and vows made at Baptism and when we rededicate ourselves each time we renew our vows. We promise God and one another to resist evil and defeat the works of the devil. Everything we do and say - our very being, for those in a relationship with Jesus - is based on our baptismal covenant.

There is another important reason. I think it is so important that it is equal to the first reason. Very simple, we work to build up the Kingdom of Christ, the Realm of Humanity in community relationships with other people. As the late Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London famously wrote, "No man is an Island" We are all inter-related and connected. When one person suffers, we all suffer.

You and I have been divinely given tremendous power to use our voices and minds to speak what we believe is the truth - love for God, love for other people. We have connections that the poorest and least influential people possess, and we must speak and act on their behalf.

There is no question of our connection, but it is up to decide with whom we want to stand and be in community. That is always our choice, but we must choose wisely and intentionally. Of course, there is tremendous appeal to stand with those who are wealthy, have power and influence. We hope and pray that as we mature, that it is merely a glittering allusion which crumbles.

Or, we can imitate Christ, and be in community with those who are hurting, lonely alienated by abusive power, and far worse. We imitate Christ in caring for all people, and that is our task. If they are not able to speak for themselves, we become their advocate. If they are hungry, we share everything we have. We meet their material needs.

And when others are saying they're only getting what they deserved, that they aren't important, that they don't count - that's when we push back, and push hard.

History taught us the lesson. Throughout the 1930s and until the end of his life on the gallows in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer put his faith into action. He wrote: silence in the face of evil IS evil; To not speak is to speak. To not act is to act.

When we stand in communion with God's people, there is no opportunity for complacency.