

“What Do You Lack?”

October 13, 2024

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

Many of the prophets write in symbols and metaphors, so it's hard to understand exactly what they're talking about. Take Ezekiel, for instance, who describes a large wheel in the sky and dry bones coming to life in the desert. Or Isaiah at times, who refers to a suffering servant whose identity is never really clear. That kind of obscurity is part of the beauty of poetry, and most of the prophets write poetically. But not so, Amos. Amos is very straightforward about his subject. We never have any doubt who he's referring to or what he's describing.

We can't read Amos's words without understanding his economic concern. He looks at the society of Israel, the northern kingdom, and sees nothing but exploitation of the poor by the rich. Amos writes at a time when Israel is under pressure from a powerful military threat called Assyria. Assyria is possibly the world's first super-power and it is rolling across the region, wiping out kingdoms right and left. Israel is in its path and will soon be decimated just like its neighbors. Amos believes the reason Israel is threatened is because it has failed to care for its poor.

His words are unequivocal: “Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.” All the work the rich have extracted from the poor to build their homes and tend their grapevines will give them nothing. The rich in that society are put on notice: stop neglecting the poor or everything you've built will be destroyed.

Amos points out what many societies have learned over the centuries. We cannot sustain an economy that only serves the wealthiest and allows the poor to suffer. Ultimately that model leads to destruction. Think the French Revolution in 1789 or the Bolshevik uprising in Russia in 1917, the overthrow of the Shah in Iran in 1978 and of Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979. The list goes on and on. When societies place the interests of the very wealthiest above the needs of the poor, they crumble. And that's not to say that what replaces them is much better. In fact, it's often a lot worse in many ways.

So, the pattern Amos warns about is repeated over and over. The remedy he offers isn't reversing the power relationships so that the poor can exploit the rich and mistreat them. The remedy is to do justice. “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” Doing justice, ensuring that the needs of the poor are addressed and exploitation ceases, will lead to prosperity and peace for everyone. It sounds so simple!

But we know it's not that easy. It's not that easy to let go of our attachment to wealth and give up finding our security in the accumulation of things. Even if we're sincere in our desire to walk with God, what's required of us can be very hard. That's what the man learned who approached Jesus asking about inheriting eternal life. Even his question reveals he doesn't really

understand what he's asking about. How can you earn something you inherit? But more than that, he wants to be transformed without changing. He's devout, but his devotion doesn't seem to have made much of an impression. It's left him empty. He's just going through the motions of piety. Seeing this, Jesus we're told looks on the man with love. He has compassion on him because he can see this man's soul is suffering. So, Jesus puts his finger on the one nerve he knows will cause pain; the one thing he lacks.

This story isn't just a random encounter for the writer of this gospel. The gospels are written to address the needs of the communities where they originate. Chances are, the community of Mark's gospel is not filled with the uber-rich. These aren't people who have massive possessions. But many of them may be struggling with the decision to commit themselves to this movement. They may be having trouble giving up what they've had to leave behind, whether it's their family relationships or their status in society or whatever might have defined them in their own minds. The spiritual life calls on us to give up relying on our achievements and our abilities to find fulfillment. And seek it instead in the presence of God through compassion and love of neighbor. As John Calvin would say, the Christian life is summed up in the denial of self.

This story in Mark's gospel encourages those who hear it to look within themselves and discover what they lack. What do you lack that prevents you from truly entering God's kingdom, from living a whole and lasting life right now? It might be too great an attachment to money and possessions. But it can also be things less tangible, like bitterness or resentment. Some people hang onto past hurts so tightly that they begin to define them and to shape how they see the world. It may be easier to renounce possessions than to renounce our right to revenge or to live with righteous anger against those who've wronged us.

Jesus offers the man who comes to him a chance to be free of the possessions that possess him. And he offers us the same chance. He offers us a chance to be free of anger and hate, so we can see our sisters and brothers clearly, as he sees the man before him, and can extend compassion and love without expectation of receiving anything in return. Imagine what kind of society can be built when each of us is able to let go of our fears and resentments and seek the well-being of others ahead of our own.

It's the kind of society Amos hoped to move Israel toward. He enjoins them to seek good and not evil, to pursue what's best for all instead of only tending to themselves. He sees their failure to do that as the reason for their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians. But that's only one way a society can be crushed. As Bryan Stevenson points out in his book *Just Mercy*, about the criminal justice system, "The opposite of justice is poverty." Mass incarceration and mistreatment of inmates who are poor takes a toll on the soul of a society. It leaves us empty and uncaring. As Stevenson writes, "We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our own humanity." Amos hoped to restore the soul of his society; Jesus hoped to heal the suffering soul of the man with great possessions. We are called to look within ourselves to find what keeps our souls in bondage, to find what we lack to keep us from embracing the compassion of God's kingdom so we can experience life that's whole and lasting.

There is no more urgent need in the world than people willing to let go of fear and hatred and embrace compassion. Look at the violence in our society. Too many of us are committed to protecting our status, our access to wealth and power, at any cost. Too many of us are willing to stay silent in the face of injustices against asylum seekers and refugees, against gay, lesbian and transgender people, against people who are unhoused and sleeping in doorways and beneath bridges, all because of what it costs financially and socially to show compassion. And while it's true nothing is impossible for God, God chooses to use us to accomplish justice and compassion in the world. God chooses us to reveal God's kingdom.

So, what do you lack? What do you need to let go? Your soul is crying out for healing, longing to reveal God's love and compassion. What stands in your way? Look deep within yourselves and find the one thing you lack and let it go; and follow Christ for the life of the world.

Amen