

“TOUGH CALL”

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Amos 7:7-17

Mark 6:14-29

This summer, when I was laying out plans for worship for the coming year, I realized that I would be preaching just two Sundays in October – because last week Carlos preached and next week is Laity Sunday. So rather than do a sermon series in October, I have two, what I call “stand alone sermons.” And when I saw that I would have two stand alone sermons, I decided it would be fun to delve into two little books of the Bible tucked away in the Old Testament – books that are not so well known to many of us – the books of Amos and Ruth. Today is Amos.

Do me a favor, will you? The next time you hear me say I’m going to preach on something because I think it will be fun, slap me or something. Amos is about as far away from fun as you can get. As a matter of fact, I read something this week that a preaching professor at Perkins Seminary said about Amos. This professor taught preaching at that United Methodist Seminary for 28 years, and he estimated that he had listened to over 700 sermons, in addition to preaching hundreds of his own – so he figures, over his lifetime he’s been exposed to nearly 2000 sermons – yet (listen to this!) he says he can count on one hand – one hand! – the number of sermons he heard based on the book of Amos.

Why? Because he says, “Amos is tough; Amos is blunt; Amos says things that no one wished to hear 2800 years ago; things no one much wishes to hear today.” He goes on to say that if any pastor wishes to climb the clergy ladder to bigger and bigger churches, they ought to avoid Amos. Because climbing the clergy ladder requires one not to ruffle too many feathers – and oh, does Amos ruffle feathers! Big time! (On-line, “Preaching from Amos?” John C. Holbert)

So, let me introduce you to this feather ruffler! Amos was from a town called Tekoa, and he was a shepherd. God called him from that life to the life of a prophet. And let me tell you, friends, it was a tough call!

Things were bad in that day and age in Israel – really bad. It was in the mid 700’s BCE, and the king on the throne was a man by the name of Jeroboam II. Frankly, Jeroboam thought things were going quite well, thank you very much. He had things right where he wanted them. It was a time of great power and prosperity, the rich in Israel were getting richer by the day – which of course, they thought was exactly what God intended – after all, they were the chosen ones. At

that time, they weren't under threat from any neighboring superpowers. People were pretty much looking out for number one, doing whatever pleased them, and occasionally would visit the temple and offer lip service and shallow worship to God.

All of which displeased God greatly, so He called this shepherd from Tekoa, Amos by name to speak a word from Him, to tell the world how disgusted He was. As I said, it was a tough call then to be a prophet.

Truth be told, it's a tough thing anytime to be a prophet. It's tough to speak truth to those who do not want to hear it. When Amos prophesied and told the people that God was disgusted with what they were doing and how they were living, he was attacked. And wait until you hear who one of the greatest attackers was? The high priest of the temple! He began to say slanderous things about Amos, making accusations against him, and warning King Jeroboam about "this dangerous man." (Guilty people do that a lot you know – deflect attention away from themselves and their sins, by pointing to their accusers.)

It was tough for Amos to do what God asked of him. It was tough for the other prophet we heard about this morning in the Gospel lesson – John the Baptist – so tough that it cost him his very life.

Why, it's tough enough today for those who lift prophetic voices! I've told you several times how much I admire the new pope of the Roman Catholic Church – Francis. I think in many ways he is a prophet – calling the church back to its roots, back to caring for the poor, and giving up their luxurious ways, and worrying more about love, justice, mercy and salvation and less about fixating on issues like birth control, abortion, sexual orientation and other such things. His is a refreshing and inspiring voice, yet oh my goodness, is he getting attacked from the conservative traditional establishment of the Catholic Church. For exactly the same reasons Amos was attacked I think – they don't want to change the comforts and control to which they've become accustomed.

It's a tough call to be one of God's prophets. But thank God for those who listen to that call and do what God asks of them. Because God knows the world needs to hear what He has to say!

The chosen people of God, the Israelites, in Amos' time had totally lost their spiritual balance. They rested on their laurels as God's chosen ones, deluding themselves into thinking they deserved the cushy lives they were living, that they deserved to have power, they deserved to have fancy worship services in their temples. It was all about them, about looking out for number one – they had turned their backs on God, and those for whom God has an especially tender place in His heart – the poor, the vulnerable, widows and orphans, those without a voice. They were running amuck – and God had had it – and Amos let them know it in no uncertain terms.

In very strong language, verse after verse, Amos lays out their sins against God and humanity, and in the midst of his ranting, he lifts us several powerful images – images meant to get their attention. One was the image of a bowl of fruit – a bowl of fruit, which starts out as a gift from God meant to nourish and feed – and then through neglect, sits there and rots. Could Israel see that that was them?

Amos also told them that he has seen a vision of God with a plumb line in his hand. Some of you know that a plumb line is a piece of string with a piece of lead on the bottom of it that carpenters hold up against a wall to see if it is “plumb” or straight – the way it is meant to be. Amos said to the people that God was holding a plumb line up to them – and they were found wanting – and one day, they would pay for their sins.

There was no getting around Amos’ message from God to the people – you have sinned and fallen short of who God created you to be. You have forgotten the life God called you to live. It’s all about you, and to heck with everyone else. It’s about your comfort, your life, your riches. You’ve turned your back on God – oh sure, you pay Him lip service in the temple with your fancy worship – but they are empty words and your heart is not in it. You could care less about living your faith. And God is angry, He will not have it – you will be punished!

It was a harsh word for the broken world in Amos’ day. And my friends, unless you’re asleep, you have to have been thinking while I’ve been talking about those days – oh my, Amos could be talking about our world this day.

Scary, isn’t it? Look at the charges God through Amos brought against the people – they forgot about the poor and needy, they only cared about themselves, and getting more and more things for themselves and being in control, getting their own way. They turned their backs on God over and over again

Is there any doubt that some of those same things can be said of our world? Studies have shown that even in the midst of the most recent recession the world’s richest people have gotten even richer, and incredibly so! The disparity between the have’s and have not’s is greater than ever.

And if we need any evidence that the world tends to be fixated on getting more and more things for themselves, and being in control – all we need to do is look at Washington right now, and that sad state of affairs. Grown men and women calling each other names, refusing to talk to one another, all for what? To keep their jobs?

Who is caring for the families whose breadwinners have been told to stay home from work? Who is caring for the veterans who sacrificed so much to serve their country and can’t even visit a memorial erected in their honor? The list goes on and on . . . who is caring? It seems like nobody, because the powers that be can’t sit down and be civil to one another.

What is happening? How have we come to this?

You know, I read a story Tony Campolo once told about how when he was a child growing up in the city of Philadelphia, one mischief night, he and some friends snuck into a corner store near his home. They didn't steal anything – what they did was change the price tags on everything in the store. So, the next day when the customers came in bobby pins were marked \$10, while a radio was marked 10 cents. As Tony says, "What was valuable was made cheap, and what was cheap had been made valuable." And he continues, "That story is indicative of what has happened to America. It is almost as though someone has broken into our society and changed the price tags. We are not willing to invest very much in what is really precious, and we seem to spend all of our time and energies on that which is worthless. Our values are all mixed up!" (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 189)

Sadly, if we take a look at Washington today, Tony might be right. Just like Amos was right in his day. And just as God was angry at the people of Israel, I think God is probably angry today.

And lest we too easily just think about those people back then and down there in DC, I would invite all of us to consider what Amos has to say to us individually. Because in the end, the only behavior we can control is our own.

What would Amos say to you today about how God feels about your life? If God lowered a plumb line, what would it say about how you are living, what matters to you, how you love, how you care, where you put your time and energy?

Unfortunately, like Israel in Amos' day and Washington in our day, we are pretty good at rationalization and denial of who we really are and what we do. We sin and then rationalize why we did what we did. We do that so much that we fail to see how far we have wandered away from God and the persons God has called us to be. I read a very thought provoking quote this week that goes like this: "If you live in a graveyard long enough, you stop crying when someone dies."

In other words, if you sin long enough and ignore what you're doing and what it means, eventually you don't even worry about it. "Sure, I cheated a little bit on my income taxes, but who doesn't." "Yea, so I gossiped, but it didn't hurt anybody." "Yes, I cheated at school, but nobody saw me, and my friend next to me didn't care." "Yea, I went out and had a drink with my colleague from work, but my wife/my husband will never find out."

And on and on it goes – rationalization, self-deception, wandering away from the life God called us to live. We'd like to think it doesn't matter, that life just goes on its merry way – but it does matter, it matters to God, and there will come a day, as Amos reminded the Israelites – there will come a day of judgment when you have to answer for it.

I told you from this beginning there's a reason preachers don't preach from Amos very often – it's not the least bit uplifting. It's tough – a tough word from the Lord to straighten up and fly right – or else.

But here's the note of grace, my friends. God sends that word because He loves us, loves us as a parent loves a child. You who are parents know that part of your job as a parent is to help your child grow to be a good person, a just person, a person of integrity, making good decisions, living a good life caring for others as well as themselves. You also know that sometimes your child makes bad choices, and that part of your role as a parent is to call them on it, punish them when necessary, and have them live with the consequences of their actions.

Through it all, you still love them. That's why you punish them. Because you love them, and want them to learn.

But the important thing is that you're there through it all – through the uncovering of the wrongdoing, through the punishment, and after it's over – you're there through it all.

And so is God. At the very end of the book of Amos, there is a word of hope. Amos tells the people that one day God will restore Israel – one day it will be all right again.

And God indeed did restore Israel, and God indeed redeemed humankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our Savior. Because of Him, we are never without hope. No matter how dire our circumstances, no matter how low we sink, Jesus is there and, if we're willing, and we repent, and want to be changed, can bring us through it.

So don't go out of here today with your head hung low because of the state of this world, our country, or even your own soul. Go out of here today knowing that God can make a way through the mess – no, God will make a way through the mess.

There is hope. There is always hope. Because there is always God.

Amen.