

February 28, 2016

The National Presbyterian Church

**Prophetic Words: “Justice”**

Amos 5, focus vv. 12-15 and 24

Rev. Donna Marsh

I'd like to tell you a true story about an ordinary guy named Bob Fletcher, who did something so extraordinary with his life that it merited an A-section *New York Times* story when he died at the ripe old age of 101.

Bob (not the most exciting name) was a single guy in his early 30's living in Northern California in 1941. Through his work as an agriculture inspector for the state of California (not the most exciting job), Bob had come to know Japanese families who owned and ran fruit farms.

Three months after Pearl Harbor, an executive order from President Franklin D. Roosevelt paved the way for the US government to force 120,000 Japanese-Americans into internment camps for the rest of the war. The Japanese families that Bob Fletcher had come to know were among those forced to leave their land.

One day, one of those farmers who was packing his bags came to Bob Fletcher with an idea. Asking not for himself, a Mr. Tsukamoto asked if Bob would be willing run 2 friends' farms while he was gone; one of which was owned by an elderly neighbor. In exchange for managing the farms and paying the bills, Bob could keep all the profits.

Bob Fletcher said yes—and decided to run *three* farms, including Mr. Tsukamoto's. Mr. Fletcher worked 18 hour days and lived in the hired hands' quarters on one of the farms. He paid all of the bills for the 3 families and kept only half the profits for himself. His decision to help the Japanese families did not make him a hero in his California community; it made him a pariah.

But because of what Bob Fletcher did, those three families had homes and livelihoods to return to when they were finally released in 1945. When the Tsukamotos came home, they found profits in their bank, their freshly cleaned house ready for them, and the newly married Bob Fletcher and his wife living in their hired hands' quarters. When asked years later why she and Bob didn't move into the main house, Mrs. Fletcher said, “It was the Tsukamotos' house.”

After the war, Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher bought their own farm and continued to help their Japanese-American friends to overcome simple, daily acts of discrimination. For example, a Japanese farmer would go to the hardware store to buy a part, and be told that there was none. Mr. Fletcher would go back to the same store, the same day, and buy the same part for his friend.

When Bob Fletcher was asked about all of this at age 98, he said, “I don’t know about courage. It took a devil of a lot of work.” Bob Fletcher knew what it took to establish justice.

Let’s turn to God’s word to see if we can figure out what establishing justice meant for the people of Israel and what it means for us.

Let us pray. “Living God, in the words of the prophets, you challenge us and convict us. Open our ears to hear, our hearts to repentance, and our souls to receive your grace in Jesus Christ. It is through His righteousness that we come to you, Amen.”

Justice has become a polarized and polarizing topic. The problem is that anytime we even start a conversation about justice, all of our cultural and political reflexes come into play. Those reflexes may be conditioned by personal experience of injustice, which is real. They be conditioned by having been trained to work *within* the justice system, or they may have been conditioned by our partisan culture.

The thing is, we need to talk about justice. Some form of the word justice appears over 200 times in the Old Testament alone. Justice is a prophetic word, and we *need* to contemplate how it fits in to a faithful Christian life.

Justice is something that we are ALL supposed to care about. On some basic level, seeking justice is supposed to be something that unites us as Christians, not divides us. How do we get to there from here?

We can start by digging down beneath the partisan layers to what we have in common. We are all supposed to have Jesus in common, although bizarrely, there seems to be a competition in politics as to who owns Jesus. Scripture, which we also have in common, makes it clear that Jesus *owns US*. All of us.

So let’s start by listening to what Scripture has to say—and listening to what Amos has to say. I haven’t heard anyone fighting over who owns Amos lately, and when you read the book, it’s abundantly clear why.

When we start with Scripture, it reminds us that justice matters to God across the board. Justice matters in every time, in every place, in every culture, at every level of society, in every person’s life. And Scripture illustrates that injustice is present in every person’s life, at every level of society, in every culture, in every time and place.

Modern Christians love the prophets that comfort the afflicted, but Amos was a prophet who afflicted the comfortable. When Amos spoke, life was good in Israel. An earthquake, conquest by enemies, and exile were all coming, but no one knew that—those things hadn’t happened yet. In about 760 BC, when Amos spoke, disaster and injustice seemed like other people’s problems.

After the death of King Solomon, the 12 tribes of Israel had split into 2 kingdoms. The capital of the northern kingdom was Samaria, and the capital of the southern kingdom was Jerusalem. These kingdoms had their ups and downs, but the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC was an up

period. They were stronger militarily than their neighbors, and the economy was good, at least for many.

Along came Amos to spoil the party. A native of the southern kingdom, he was sent by God to the royal city of the northern kingdom to deliver a wake-up call.

As wake up calls go, the book of Amos starts off with a relatively gentle snooze button for the people of Israel. The first six accusations and promises of punishment are for neighboring communities. Damascus, other people. Gaza, other people. Tyre, Edom, Ammonites, Moab, tsk, tsk, tsk---other people.

What did those communities do wrong? They brutally conquered other neighbors, sold other communities into exile, turned family grudges into permanent national rifts, ripped open pregnant women, and ripped open the grave of a king to desecrate a country.

At this point, the king and court of Israel were probably thinking, “Good, the barbarians will get what they have coming to them.”

But *we* should listen more carefully. Anytime we read hard passages like this in the Bible, we need to stop and ask, what does this tell us about God? And what does God value?

If ever there were a passage that shows us that God has his eye on all nations, this is it. God is not merely concerned with what his special people do, he is concerned with what everybody does. There is no war, no act of violence, no aggression that escapes God’s notice.

This also tells us that there is some universal standard of right and wrong in God’s eyes. None of these communities mentioned were people who had the Torah, the Law given by God to Moses and the Hebrew people. But there was still an expectation of justice, and an awareness on God’s part when that expectation was violated.

One of the most interesting and ironically beautiful commentaries on the Old Testament prophets was written by the Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1962, just 20 years after the Holocaust. He was reading and writing about the prophets, including Amos, having seen the decimation of a people and the survival of a remnant firsthand.

Heschel notes that long before there was any such thing as international law, the prophet Amos presupposes, quote, a “conception of right and wrong. . . which was binding for all men, though it was not formally proclaimed; and there was a Lawgiver capable of enforcing it. . .” End quote.

Over against the pattern of human depravity, there is a created moral order to which all nations are accountable in God’s eyes. God sees and God cares, all the time, in every culture, everywhere, even when we think that injustice has escaped God’s notice. And God cares especially about the most vulnerable people: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger.

But the people of Israel were still hitting the snooze button on their wake up call because all of this was about other people. Then Amos hit closer to home with an accusation against the

people of Judah, their kinsmen in the southern kingdom. What did *they* do wrong? The people of Judah “rejected the law of the Lord,. . .and [were] led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked.”

Then Amos really hit home. He saved his longest, harshest and most specific critiques for the people of Israel in the northern kingdom. So what did *they* do wrong? Their transgressions were in the realm of BOTH faith and social ethics. This is a fault line---and a false dichotomy---that comes up all the time when modern Christians talk about what God wants from us. In God’s eyes, spiritual integrity and social behavior both matter.

Amos first critiques the Israelites for doing the right things in worship with the wrong attitude. They made it look good, but they couldn’t wait for it to be over. Genuine repentance was missing from their sacrifices. True adoration and humility were missing from their worship. God noticed, and God cared.

That’s not about other people—that happens to the best of us sometimes. How can we appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ if we’re not willing to admit that without it, we’re toast? Amos is a wake-up call that says, you can say the right churchy things, and still not be right with God.

Amos is also a wake-up call to all those who think they are right with God, but are not right with their fellow human beings. If we do appreciate all that God has done for us, justice will be part of our whole-life response to God.

So we need to dig deeper into what justice means. Sometimes we have a very hard time defining justice, and therefore a hard time agreeing on what injustice looks like, much less how to fix it. There can be different approaches and different tactics to seeking justice, but all of those approaches and tactics should lead to the same result—a society that passes the Amos test. In its aspirations, yes, but also in cold, hard, data-driven reality.

This is a great moment to bravely set aside our partisan lenses, and look at what Amos described as injustice among God’s own people, who were at that moment, generally happy, well-fed, and non-violent. But in their world, injustice could be found in their economic, social and legal systems.

The wealthy had no regard for the poor upon whose labor they depended, and when the poor could not pay their debts, they were enslaved. Sexual exploitation was part of the culture, so was drinking too much. (Even back in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, those things go together in the same paragraph.) The poor could not find justice in the courts that were held daily at the gates of the city; usually because they could not afford to bribe their fellow citizens who were making decisions that affected them.

Does that sound like our society? Like our cities? Or are you wondering how that applies to you? Try this sniff test to look for the residuals of injustice in your life: “It’s not a blessing if you had to sin to get it.”

God notices. God cares. And God calls us to change our way of life. “Seek good, and not evil, that you may live, and so that the God of hosts will be with you.”

The next hard part of reading Amos is realizing that God holds both individuals *and* communities accountable for living godly and just lives. So we have to find ways to establish justice in our personal relationships and in public life.

When we talk about public life, we have to talk about policy and politics. In a widely circulated column this week, David Brooks talks about the messy necessity of politics. He talks about the need for different voices to be heard, and compromises to be hammered out, because that is the best and most viable alternative to authoritarianism.

It makes sense that Christians and the church should use their voices in those conversations to advocate not for their own power, but for the powerless. Advocacy is not inherently a bad thing. Amos would approve.

Yet some of you know that I struggle with my own role and the church’s role in advocacy. From the time they are very young, we tell our children, “use your words” to accomplish your goals. Words matter. Obviously, said the preacher quoting the columnist.

But I do get frustrated with the endless making of statements that seem divorced from any impact. You could spend an entire day on social media “liking” political statements and signing onto delusional virtual petitions that make not one bit of impact in the real world. There is a name for that, it’s called “slacktivism.”

Some of this boils down to a sense of call. You may be called to e-mail members of Congress, and to march around the mall downtown. You may be called to be a prophet who calls culture to repentance and government to accountability. That is a real thing, and it’s important.

God called Amos to be a prophet, and God is using Amos’ words even today. But someone had to let Amos into the palace, or at least into the city gates. He had to be in the proximity of someone with actual power to change the things that bothered him and God. Even in the age of social media, someone has to be watching or listening to your advocacy for it to be effective.

Christian stewardship meets advocacy when we use *the power that we actually have* for the good of others. Imagined power doesn’t accomplish much. But real power accomplishes a lot, and everyone has some form of it.

Your sphere of influence may be the State Department, a giant defense contractor, CNN, a bank, a political rally, a deal, a neighborhood association, or a family. Your sphere of influence may be a bunch of drunken high school teammates who are trying to decide between passing out in someone’s basement or finding some drunken high school girls to take advantage of. Or your sphere of influence may be the pack of middle school girls deciding whether to post a picture on Instagram that’s going to make someone cry.

Whatever your sphere of influence, use it to establish justice in community, and you will be faithful.

But there is a reason I started this sermon with the story of Bob Fletcher. Bob Fletcher chose to establish justice through localized, personal actions that had the real effect of establishing justice.

We can make all the public statements we want about justice, but if those statements are inconsistent with what we pay the cleaning lady (should we be so privileged to have one), and how we treat the Uber driver (should we be so privileged to have one), we have failed the Amos test. If we make statements about justice and by day, but feed the money-making media hysteria machine by night, our words are empty and peace will elude us and our nation. If we have been unjust and not asked forgiveness, that is where establishing justice needs to start.

In order to preach this sermon in good conscience, I have some justice homework to do. I need to reach out to someone to whom I have been a bad friend and colleague. Not 10 commandments-breaking bad, not legally actionable bad, and not anyone you know.

But still there was injustice to be resolved, because this person deserved fairness and honesty from me that I didn't deliver. Statements are great, especially if someone is listening. But you have to start by establishing justice where you are personally responsible for it. What's your justice homework?

Pastors live at a strange nexus of public witness and personal vocation. We could spend all day signing onto letters and petitions and going to meetings about justice issues in which the influence of Christendom, and especially the influence of mainline Presbyterianism, is vastly overestimated. We could preach every week in response to specific people and very specific issues in the news. But in the long run, the Kingdom is better served when we connect with the zeitgeist of the people without becoming reactive puppets of the culture.

Ultimately, it's our job to point to the timeless standards of faith and ethics in Scripture and let you figure out for yourselves when injustice is being trumpeted in the public square, or when we have more insidiously been led to endorse injustice as a platform virtue.

At the end of the day, it's our job to point to the Savior who paid *the only just price* for millennia of complex, compounded communal sins and for our lifetimes of deeply personal sins. It's our job to point to the perfectly just God who loved us enough to make that sacrifice.

It's our job to echo Scripture's call to active justice. Because God sees and God cares how we worship and live. But all of the sermons we can preach, all of the public advocacy we can muster, and all of the personal justice any of us can create, need the force of God behind them.

I started with Bob Fletcher, but Amos started his sermons by pronouncing the almighty power of God, and ended them by pronouncing God's astounding choice to redeem. God's power and grace bracket the call to justice in Amos. This prophetic word sets challenging, unexpected standards of faithfulness for us, but also gives us hope that justice will ultimately prevail in this world.

So let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream—a stream that runs through us, through our words, through our actions, through our church, through our politics, and through the veins of our nation, but comes from above.

Repeat Amos 5:14-15