

Proper 10 - 7 Pentecost – Year C – July 14, 2010 - Homily
Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37
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Whatever our vocation or calling is, fulfilling it can be mighty difficult, especially in the face of resistance, and even outright rejection. The prophet Amos, who still thinks of himself as a farmer, receives a sharp rebuke from the priest Amaziah when he arrives to share the Lord's prophetic words. "[G]o, flee away to the land of Judah... and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel." Given the rest of the exchange, there can only be two things going on here: a genuine lack of hospitality, which is always possible, but not highly probable. Or much more likely, the fear that Amos is about to change the status quo, upset the apple cart, and generally disrupt the nice cozy relationship that has developed between the king and the priest, at great cost to the people of that kingdom.

The whole basis for Amos' arrival in the kingdom of Israel, and prophecy against the Israelites is described elegantly and graphically for us in the picture of a plumb line. We all know that houses settle, and especially older houses. I expect we all have a story about a wallpapering or tiling nightmare. Especially one where there is a pattern to be matched sheet by sheet, or tiles that need to be matched up, or a line in the wallpaper that needs to be hung straight. That's when we quickly find out that the walls in our house are anything but straight, and we have to cut and fudge our way through the decorating with little strips of paper or pieces of tile to fill in the triangular gap that we always seem to have left at the edge of the wall. In theory, builders use a simple plumb line to build straight walls. It's important because buildings that are too far off the perpendicular will either fall down on their own, or have to be demolished as unsafe. Unlike so many of the symbols used in the Scriptures, a plumb line is still current and speaks directly to us today. In this case, it is not a physical plumb line, but a spiritual one, showing how far the Israelites have strayed from God's commandments, God's righteousness, and God's justice in their daily lives. The corruption that has spread through the major load-bearing walls of the house of Israel has come before God for inspection. The leaders will be held accountable for their actions, as we all are. Amos has come bearing the message of judgment.

You and I have become accustomed to thinking of judgment as purely negative, especially in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures versus what has become popularly known as the revelation of the loving and gracious God of the New Testament. That judgment, if you'll pardon the pun, is far from the truth. There are plenty of Scriptures that speak of God's changelessness, and God's steadfast mercy and compassion throughout the Bible. There are also several that tell us in no uncertain terms that God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8); that God is the alpha and the omega who is, was, and is to come (Revelation 1:8); and many references in the Psalms to our everlasting God. In fact, God has always been loving and gracious – that has never changed. It is only when we read passages like the warning in Amos that our thoughts quickly jump to a wrathful God, out to punish us, and there to spoil all our fun. How often, when we are also undergoing a period of God's judgment do we have the equivalent of a two-year olds tantrum, because we want what we want, and we want it now? We so quickly forget that the judgment of God is an inseparable part of God's grace and mercy.

In biblical terms, a judge is someone who not only makes judgments about corrective behavior, but also actively seeks to work for justice, and to set things right: including, setting things right between us and God. A prophet or a prophetic word often come to us because God loves us

enough to tell us the truth about ourselves – especially from the perspective of the bigger scheme of things – beyond our selfish motives and individualistic tendencies. There is a reason that Israel is under judgment. If we find ourselves in that place, there is a reason. Israel has fallen into temptation. God has commanded Amos to become His prophet to speak truth to power in Israel because Israel is way out of line. She cannot continue in such a haphazard and unsafe way or there will be major damage when, not if, the house falls down. Speaking truth to power is an unenviable assignment – but a prophetic vocation, like all our vocations is usually unavoidable, even when we are in denial about the call. The Israelite leaders have built for themselves a very comfortable and profitable arrangement. The price that the people are paying is too high. In effect, the Israelites exercise piety without social justice, which amounts to nothing more than hypocrisy. The leaders are also in love with their power and status, but pay little attention to justice for all, in their autocratic posturing.

Amos predicts disaster for the Israelites through loss of lineage, loss of family, loss of land, and exile. A similarly devastating equivalent might look like this today: loss of a spouse, loss of family by illness or accident, loss of our job or pensions, loss of our homes due to a financial crisis, and loss of faith, or spiritual exile. Some of you may remember the collapse of the corporation Enron, which left hundreds without jobs or pensions. We might also wonder who was holding the plumb line as the scandalous behavior of the Enron executives went on unchecked. Ponder this: wouldn't real justice have been served for all concerned if someone had put a stop to the shenanigans long before the workers took such a hit? Long before those who could least afford to lose their pensions and their jobs found themselves on the street – literally. No doubt if justice had been served at an appropriate time before the collapse, then the Enron executives would have cried foul.

God's prophetic word in this reading from the prophet Amos amounts to what we might still think of as tough love, but it contains good advice nonetheless. After all, wouldn't you want someone to care enough to catch your arm if you were about to step off the sidewalk into the path of a truck? We need to get beyond the cultural message of our day that seems to say we are helpless victims of a cruel and hard world, especially when the world disagrees with us, and things don't go the way we want them to go. Realistically, we are often decisive agents of sinfulness in need of the gift of God's judgment and healing. Just like the Israelites, it is the only way we will see clearly where and how we have gone astray, and exiled ourselves from God's righteousness. Humility and repentance are the best responses to God's gracious judgment. These characteristics of grace-filled living help us to see God's mercy in action for our ultimate good, and help us to stay on the right road. As the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Amen.