

It's All About Jesus and Justice

Dr. Morgan F. Roberts



Amos 5:21-24

Comments on the Scripture Lesson

I'm going to try something this morning that I've never tried before. Our morning lesson isn't very long, so I want to read it twice. The first reading is from the New Revised Standard Version Bible in your pew; the second is from Eugene Peterson's popular paraphrase, *The Message*, in which he states in today's terms what the message of Amos might sound like in one of our churches today. After you've heard both readings, I think that one thing is clear: Amos wouldn't survive as a pastor in one of our Presbyterian congregations. For that matter, Amos wouldn't even have succeeded as a guest preacher in our churches. You can't be so tactless, so blatantly insulting, and be a successful preacher in our denomination. You've got to deliver your message in more diplomatic terms than Amos did to be a successful pastor in the Presbyterian Church.

Sermon

I think you can see what I was getting at in my introduction to this morning's scripture lesson. If, on some Sunday when Pastor Steve was away, a preacher like Amos was somehow accidentally invited to be a guest in our pulpit, it would be less than nanoseconds after worship before Pastor Steve's cell phone would be vibrating with complaints. What in heaven's name was he thinking about when he invited this modern-day Amos to preach in our pulpit?

You can't barge in here on a Sunday morning, insult our music program, say that God is fed up with our fine music, leaving Genevieve in tears, and making our gentle organist Jonathan so infuriated that he was seen heading for the kitchen to find a meat cleaver with which to confront the preacher in the

courtyard after church. You can't say that our festivals of Christmas and Easter are just pseudo-spiritual entertainment, that our lovely sanctuary isn't lovely in God's eyes, that our offerings are odoriferous to God – and that all God wants instead of everything we call “church” is justice. Proper Presbyterian preachers don't talk in such scalding terms.

Of course, it all depends upon what Amos means by “justice.” And, reading elsewhere in Amos' book, it is clear that he is preaching to those who “lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches,...eat lambs from the flock,...who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils” – all of this while they “trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land.” Justice, in the Hebrew scriptures, is not what is ordinarily meant when we see a lawyer's billboard advertisement offering to “get us justice” as retribution. In the Hebrew prophets, justice is restorative, the restoration of life's necessities to those who are ordinarily deprived of them by those of us who always enjoy them.

Justice is exactly what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 25:31-46 when he warned us that, on the day of judgement, we will be judged by what we have done for the “least of these” – the little people in whose poverty Jesus is incarnate. That's why he says, “I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Amos, the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus are on the same page when they talk about justice: restoring to the little people of the world those necessities they cannot have without our help. Justice is when we who always have our daily bread choose to “live simply so that others may simply live.”

So, let's pretend that some modern-day Amos somehow got into our pulpit and went at us in the unsparing and undiplomatic style of the ancient Amos. Following the service, except for a few brave souls who assault him with criticism, hardly anyone would greet him. So, let's imagine what it would be like if I took him aside after church and, as an older

brother, gave him some advice. While the rest of you are comforting Genevieve, and others are restraining Jonathan, getting him to surrender his meat cleaver, I take Amos aside to give him some tips – the kind of advice he needs, if he hopes to have any kind of a future in the Presbyterian Church.

So, I begin by telling him that the kind of restorative justice that he wants to see “rolling down like waters” and as “an ever-flowing stream” is actually happening here. I say to him, “Look, Amos, it is happening here at Church of the Palms.” I take him to our food pantry, and show him the huge amount of food that is being distributed to the needy. Then I say, “See, Amos, there's justice, justice in the form of food.” Then I take him with me to one of the many unseen places out in the community where some of you individually are doing the same things in soup kitchens or shelters, or in classrooms where you're tutoring. And I say to him, “See, Amos, there's justice. Church of the Palms is not just what you see and hear in this sanctuary on Sunday morning. Church of the Palms is also what happens in the all the other places where the works of

get the whole story before you drop your diatribes on us. That's part of your job as a preacher.” And so, Amos thanks me, and promises to do better next time (if there ever is a next time), after which he apologizes to Genevieve, and shakes hands with Jonathan who, by now, has settled back quietly on the organ bench.

But, do you realize, what we've learned from my imaginary exercise with a modern-day Amos preaching in our church, and with my make-believe conversation with him after the service? We've learned is that there may be much more to any church than what you see on Sunday morning. Let's look at a couple of examples.

Amos would have had a field day, scolding the splendiferous service of worship at the Shadyside Church of Pittsburgh, from which I retired as pastor in 1994. In its Romanesque sanctuary, designed by the architectural firm that created Phillips Brooks' Trinity Church of Boston, a bronze plaque imbedded in the floor of its marble chancel commemorates the beginnings of World Communion Sunday in 1933

“Wouldn't it be wonderful if someday, by some simple thing you did or said, you became Jesus to someone?”

justice are being done. All of that good work is just as much Church of the Palms as what you see on Sunday morning.”

At this point I can hear Amos saying to me, “Well, why didn't you tell me all of this when you invited me to preach here?” And I say to him, “It's your job as a preacher to check these things out ahead of time, and

under the ministry of Hugh Thomson Kerr. Amos would have had heated words for the expense of its paid choir, and for the elegance of the male ushers dressed formally in morning coats (with tails!). Somewhat in the spirit of Amos, Annie Dillard, in her book, *An American Childhood*, remembered the Shadyside of her childhood with similar criticism. However, there is much more to Shadyside Church

than what happens in that great space on a Sunday morning. In quiet, unnoticed places, some on the other side of the world, justice was, and still is, happening because of gifts given by church members long ago.

I remember one such generous member who, with his younger brother, was always living quietly and secretly well below his means. Both were graduates of Princeton and Harvard Law School. He managed the family insurance business; his younger brother practiced law. They never married and lived in the house in which they were born. During my time, this older brother served as church treasurer, so I met with him monthly to review the financial statement. I don't know how much they contributed to the church, but am guessing that it must have been substantial (I've never wanted to know what any member contributes). Because I was always fascinated by their plain and quiet way of life, I learned how they observed a simple diet. They always had oatmeal for breakfast, and chicken from the farmer's market for dinner. When I asked the older brother about having chicken for dinner every night, his response was, "Yes, but it's good." They went for a walk every night at 7:00 p.m., and read until bedtime at 10:00 p.m. (I'm not sure, but I don't think they even owned a TV.) They never sought publicity, and I can never (in my memory) remember either of them ever raising their voice. They were genuinely gentle people.

This older brother outlived the younger brother and, when he died two years ago, he left a bequest in excess of 30 million dollars to the Lord's work through various institutions. If his wishes had been observed, it would never have been reported in the newspaper; however, one of the institutions made the bequest public knowledge. So complete was this man's desire for anonymity, that his death was not even announced with an obituary! Such stewardship constituted the "other Shadyside Church." You just couldn't see it on a Sunday morning. Interestingly, however, the seemingly extravagant worship of Shadyside Church was all that these brothers had ever known

since childhood, and it was that magnificent style of worship that, all along, had somehow nourished their plain and secret discipleship! Appearances can be so deceiving.

Let me tell you about another church, the appearance of which is deceiving. It's the church from which my Nora transferred her membership when she joined Church of the Palms several weeks ago. Portland Avenue Presbyterian Church, located in the somewhat shabby west end of Louisville is a congregation of 68 members. The elderly members, who constitute the core of the church's financial support, remember when Portland was once a good place to live, but now it's a "has been" neighborhood. When their beloved sanctuary burned to the ground eight years ago, they could have given up, but decided instead to stay, and purchased the dingy building of a Kroger Supermarket that had closed, turning it into a community center. The greasy, cracked parking lot has been transformed into a lovely park with thirty new trees. Within the building, besides a plain place to worship, they offer computer education for children and seniors, a food bank, and a clothing closet. Their pastor (age 82) can afford to stay there because she has a retirement income from her former career as a school teacher. She doesn't have to serve a church like this one; she has an earned doctorate from Oxford University in England. Unless some similarly retired pastor can replace her, with all the old contributors gone, the church might have to close. But what a way to go! For one brief, bright, shining moment, they have released a mighty stream of what Amos called justice.

Let me take you now to one last place where a work of restorative justice was done where no one could see it happening. I read about it recently in a book given me by one of our teachers at the charter school where I tutor Hispanic migrant farmworker children.

At the conclusion of a successful meeting in a Brooklyn office building, a team of young business men, ran to catch a vacant cab – a rare sight at rush hour. Having brought off a successful deal, they raced for the cab so that they could get to the airport in

time for their flight home. But as they ran toward the cab, they knocked over a small portable produce stand. Oblivious to what they had done, they rushed on, hailing the cab.

But one of them stopped and went back. "Come on, you'll miss the flight," called the members of his team." "Go ahead without me," he replied, as he turned back, and got down on his hands and knees to begin picking up the fruit and vegetables that had spilled on to the sidewalk. It was then that he noticed that the stand was tended by an elderly woman with a white cane; she was obviously blind. Her eyes were closed, tears streaming down her face, and her lips were moving silently. After he had put the produce back on the stand as neatly as he could, he took some bills from his wallet and placed them in the hand of the old woman. "Maybe this will cover the damages," he said as he placed the bills into her hand. But as he walked away, the woman called after him, "Mister, Are you Jesus?" When he said, "No," she responded, "I only ask because I prayed for Jesus to help me when I heard the fruit falling."

"Are you Jesus?" The young man missed his flight, but he has never forgotten that day when someone wondered if, just maybe, he was Jesus. Wouldn't it be wonderful if someday, by some simple thing you did or said, you became Jesus to someone? That is, after all, what church is about. It is such moments that will make Church of the Palms a great church. It's all about Jesus. It's all about doing Jesus' quiet and humble works of restoration, of making God's justice flow from this place like a mighty stream. It usually happens when we are down on our hands and knees doing the lowly work of restorative justice. That's where we meet the real Jesus. And that's why the title of this sermon had to be, "It's all about Jesus and Justice."



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Church of the Palms

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