

Scripture: Amos 5:18-27

Message: So Much Need for Justice

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That reading from Amos presents some strong words for a pleasant Sunday morning in August. For those who think of God as only a God of grace and mercy and love, these words might sound extremely harsh and uncharacteristic. Why in the world would the pastor choose to preach on a passage like this? And there were moments this past week when I was wondering the same thing. Why did I choose this passage? What was I thinking?

In fact, there's a particular motivation for preaching on this passage today. Last year, at the annual meeting of our denomination, the delegates to Synod 2017 designated this particular Sunday in August as a denomination-wide Day of Justice. It's an opportunity to consider the meaning of Biblical justice, to lament injustices in our world, and to commit ourselves to the transforming work of standing alongside people whom society oppresses and pushes to the margins.

It was also interesting to attend the meeting of Synod this past June, where we had an extended discussion on how and when the church speaks to issues of injustice. Is that the role of the church? How specific should our comments be? When we speak critically of government action as a denomination, are we taking sides politically? Is this the responsibility of the church as denomination, or is it the responsibility of individual churches or members?

Our denomination has an Office of Social Justice, where staff raise awareness of particular issues in society (see <http://justice.crcna.org/>) They have chosen to focus on topics of immigration, creation care, abortion, religious persecution, poverty and hunger, and restorative justice. We also have a Canadian justice office based in Ottawa, The Centre for Public Dialogue (see <https://www.crcna.org/PublicDialogue>). With limited staff, they have chosen to focus on the core issues of indigenous justice and refugee justice.

On the website of The Centre for Public Dialogue, they define their purpose as "Seeking Justice, Speaking Hope," with this statement:

"We believe that every person is created in the image of Creator God. From this foundation, we work to promote the flourishing of all people through constructive dialogue and advocacy in Canada. As Christian citizens we stand with vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities as allies and work toward a just world in which structures and institutions give every person the opportunity to thrive."

That is a fundamental statement of understanding of our role as God's people in the world.

Contrast that with a quote from Billy Sunday, a popular evangelist in the early 1900's. He said, "The best thing that could happen to a man would be to get saved at a revival meeting, and

then walk out into the street and get run over by a truck.”

In other words, he was suggesting that the most important thing in life is to walk down the aisle of a church and give your life to Christ. That is the high point of your life. After that, it is all downhill. You will only mess things up. You are better off to end it there.

That thinking suggests that the only role of the church is to do evangelism, to call people to salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the idea that the main goal of this life is to be saved and get to heaven.

But that approach denies the importance of our continued life on this earth. We are called to make a difference right now with this new life we have in Christ. When we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are joining God’s work to bring evidence of his rule and his presence in this world. We are called to act in such a way that we take steps to make life on this earth the way God intended it to be.

As we hear these strong words from Amos, we could say that the people in the days of Amos were living out of the attitude that worship was all that mattered. There were many people who regularly came to the Temple and offered their sacrifices, but they were living lives that were not consistent with their actions on the Sabbath. Amos pointed out this mistake. *[See examples Amos mentions in 5:11, 12: “you trample on the poor and force them to give you grain and build fancy houses...you take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.” (See also Amos 2:6-8).]*

Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, at a time when Israel was enjoying great political and economic power. It was a time when the economy was booming and worship attendance was up. Life was comfortable, for the well-to-do. The people thought that if they performed the right sacrifices, it didn’t matter how they lived.

But when we understand worship as an expression of our covenant relationship with God, we cannot just focus on ourselves. Our covenant relationship with God is connected with our relationships with our neighbours. It’s summed up with two commandments: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

In worship we recommit ourselves to living as God would have us live. As the people of God, we come together to recall and proclaim the history of salvation, the story of God’s delivering power in this world. This is a story filled with God’s special love and passionate concern for the poor and excluded, the enslaved and oppressed. In worship we celebrate God’s past, present, and future deliverance and proclaim the already-but-not-yet kingdom of God in which peace will exist in its fullness. We celebrate the already-but-not-yet kingdom of God where all people, regardless of age, race, or gender, will flourish in God’s presence.

But this is not just to be nice talk that we speak and sing in church. It is something that must be lived out every day of our lives. All of life is worship. This is where it might get more

uncomfortable for us. God's idea of justice is the proper treatment of the poor and the needy. He's not talking about rich people in rich churches giving handouts to poor people. He is speaking about a system of justice as part of the kingdom of God. He's talking politics. A system that works to keep the poor, poor, and allows the rich and powerful to become more rich and powerful, at the expense of the poor, is an unjust and unrighteous system.

How do we as God's people respond when the newly elected premier of our province has made it a priority that there will be \$1 beer available by Labour Day. What about the impact of cancelling the basic income pilot project? What about the questions surrounding the health or sex education curriculum needed before school starts in another week or two? What about concerns for mental health needs or refugee support? How about a reasoned conversation about green energy and the rebate program that was already investing in our province? But without further discussion and study, the priority and fanfare is to make sure there's "a buck a beer".

Beyond our provincial concerns, how do we respond to asylum seekers crossing our borders? When we know that there are approximately 90 First Nations communities that do not have safe drinking water, how do we challenge our government to take action? Will we do more than share a Facebook post? Will we do our research and be informed? Will we do more than engage in some polarized political conversation?

There are numerous specific examples in the areas of immigration, creation care, abortion, religious persecution, poverty and hunger and restorative justice. There is much that is broken and hurting in the world around us.

Then we come together in church for a time of worship every week. Why? Does it make us feel good, that we are giving God his due? Does our worship on Sunday morning make a difference in how we live and how we act in our world on Monday to Saturday?

For the people of Israel in the days of Amos, their worship had become a way of appeasing God. Worship would keep God happy and keep him out of their public life, leaving them free to get by in the world as they chose. The prophets spoke very strongly against such worship. True worship must embrace the things that God loves, and God loves justice.

This raises important questions for us to consider: Does our worship keep us comfortable, to get by in the world as it is, or does it motivate a deep longing for the world as it could be, a hunger and thirst for justice? Does our worship invite us to love and pursue the things God loves and pursues, especially justice and mercy? Does our worship stir up a hopeful agitation for the coming of God's kingdom?

Formal worship, meeting God in this gathering of his people, is not the end of worship. We then turn around, "with God at our back" as Nicholas Wolterstorff says, and engage God's world with renewed courage and humility. This is our ongoing act of worship.

Peter Vander Meulen, from the Office of Social Justice, comments that doing justice can be as simple, and as humbling, as being willing to see and name what is in front of our noses, asking for help, and then watching justice roll.

Doing justice can be as hard, and as liberating, as being willing to act like we believe that following God's will to resist evil is safer than following our will to preserve our own skin at all costs.

The challenge is what to do with the message we hear from Amos. Now what? It could be tempting for me to tell you to write letters to the government or to the local paper. It could be tempting to tell you how to respond on the various issues or to identify which issues should be a priority.

But I will resist that temptation to give a specific direction. I don't want you to do something because the minister said this is what you have to do on this particular issue. I want you to listen to God's Word and Spirit speaking to your heart: "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream."

Listen again to the statement from the Centre for Public Dialogue: "We believe that every person is created in the image of Creator God. From this foundation, we work to promote the flourishing of all people through constructive dialogue and advocacy in Canada. As Christian citizens we stand with vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities as allies and work toward a just world in which structures and institutions give every person the opportunity to thrive."

Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Who does Jesus identify as the least of these? The people who need someone to advocate for them, "the vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities," the people who suffer injustice: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (see *Matthew 25:35-40*)

Maybe God is calling some people to address a major topic. Or maybe God is calling you to understand and support a particular person in our community. In this time of municipal elections, it can be an opportunity to ask pointed questions of the various candidates about their support of the vulnerable and marginalized in our community.

When we start seeing that we are serving Jesus as we serve others, we will stop looking at others as "those" people. We live out our covenant renewal to love God and love our neighbour. "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream," as we serve God and as we serve one another, within these walls but especially outside of these walls. This is living out our worship, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.