

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37; Colossians 1:1-14

Amos 7:7-17 is a prophecy by Amos against the political and religious powers of the northern kingdom of Israel. It begins, “This is what (God) showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line”. Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (vss. 7-9).

Although the text is quite clear that God is condemning Israel to annihilation, there is an intriguing ambiguity in this passage. The Hebrew word translated in the NRSV as “plumb line” can either be translated that way or as the words “wall of tin” (the word is an adaptation of the Assyrian word for “tin”). A frequent symbolism in both Egyptian and Jewish literature for military capability was the use of the words “tin wall” (also translated “bronze wall” and “iron wall” in Jer. 15:20 and Ezek. 4:3). Thus, this word could have two distinct meanings in this passage, and biblical scholars are divided on which meaning was actually meant by Amos here.

What Amos could be saying is that Israel is being measured by the standard created by God for the measuring of his people (a plumb-line being used architecturally for creating a straight wall or plumb). God has called Israel to be the shalom community of justice, the sharing of wealth for the elimination of poverty, and relationship with God. And by that standard, the kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam is a disaster!

Or what Amos could be saying is that Jeroboam remains in power and Israel continues to exist because it depends upon the “wall of tin” which is Assyria. But that “wall of tin” will become Israel’s nemesis, because God will put “tin” in the midst of Israel to conquer, exploit and eventually destroy it. So Jeroboam is making a serious error in creating an alliance with Assyria to guarantee Israel’s existence, for Assyria will betray Israel when it suits them, and will become God’s means of judgment against God’s people.

Whether one translates the Hebrew as “plumb line” or “wall of tin”, the outcome is still the same. Amos tells Jeroboam that God will raise up a nation (Assyria) to become Israel’s conqueror (6:14), and Israel’s army will be decimated by them (this is poignantly stated by Amos in the words “I will never again pass them by” – that is, Israel’s army, now destroyed, will never be able to pass in review before Yahweh and the king again). Rather, Israel’s places of worship will be decimated, its army destroyed, its cities laid waste, its palace burned to the ground, and the house of Jeroboam will be eliminated. This is the inevitable result for this nation because it rejected the shalom community to which it was called and it depended upon a pagan nation for its salvation.

The chief priest of Israel, Amaziah, takes great offense at Amos' words and reports him to King Jeroboam. Instructed by the king, Amaziah then seeks out Amos and orders him to no longer prophesy in Israel. Amos' response is classic:

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel” (vss. 14-15).

In this statement, Amos distances himself from the professional court prophets who are called by the high priest to apparently speak God's word to the king. But these professional prophets only speak those words the king wants to hear, as they endorse all that he and the high priest do.

Amos, on the other hand, is no professional prophet. He was an ordinary person – a “herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees”. It was God – not the high priest – that called him forth to speak God's word to the king and high priest. So the words they hear from him are indeed God's words, the unvarnished truth, and if it offends them, then they need to be offended because they are being unfaithful to God's expectations for their rule of state and religion.

In the light that Amos speaks only the truth, Amos now speaks bitter truth from God to the high priest. For trying to stop the mouth of God by attempting to stop the mouth of his legitimate prophet, Amos declares “Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land” (vs. 17). And that is exactly what happened!

Psalm 82 is a rather unique psalm, but its message is consistent with God's expectations for rulers throughout the scriptures. It begins with the words, “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (82:1).

The picture is one of an extraordinary meeting of all of the gods of the earth,¹ being held in judgment by Yahweh. But it becomes quite apparent in verses 2-5 that this psalm is actually about the kings of the nations of the earth and that they are being held in judgment by Yahweh for their policies (verses 6-8). They are called “gods”, “children of the Most High”. Popular in the thinking of the times was that each king was more than a man, but either was an incarnation of the gods (e.g., Pharaoh) or was transformed by the nation's god into a god-like being (e.g. the kings of Assyria and Babylonia, or later, the Caesars of Rome). This psalm is making that connection, stating that God has called an assembly of all the kings/gods for the purpose of making judgment on their policies and actions as kings.

¹ The Hebrew of Psalm 82 is highly archaic, indicating a very early date for the writing of the psalm. It is important to keep in mind that the earliest Israelite culture (e.g., during the exodus, wilderness wanderings and the earliest days of Israel resident in Palestine) was not monotheistic; they believed in Yahweh, but as the supreme deity of the universe, not the only deity!

God begins his judgment. “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (vss. 2-4).

God lays out to all the monarchs of the earth their essential responsibility as kings. It is to “give justice to the weak and the orphan, (to) maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute, (to) rescue the weak and the needy, (and to) deliver them from the hand of the wicked”. In other words, the work of any monarch is not to build his own wealth or even the power of the state. His job is to eliminate poverty and to guarantee equitable justice. This is, the Psalmist declares, the primary responsibility of government.

But what have these monarchs – both Israel and pagan – done with that responsibility? “They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness” (vs. 5). They see themselves as “gods”, but the fact is that they will “fall like any prince” and prove themselves mortals when they die (which they will!) (vss. 6-7). So God will judge them as being unjust and self-serving, and they will be held accountable for their actions!

And us? What about us?

Luke 10:25-37 is one of the best-known stories told by Jesus – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This story is prompted by a lawyer’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life” (vs. 25b)? Jesus answers that question by asking the man for a summary of the Law. The man replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (10:27). Jesus responds, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live” (vs. 28).

The lawyer’s response captures the essence of the Mosaic Law and is a summary of its two primary tenets. “God has meant us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him,” St. Augustine declared. This is what this summary of the Law also declared. The Deuteronomic code² – and its perception that all of society is to be built around relationship with God – teaches that such a relationship is nurtured only by our grateful commitment to God with the totality of our being. Only out of such a growing relationship to God does a solid commitment to each other and to all human society arise. Justice and economic equality is the inevitable manifestation of an authentic and deepening commitment to God.

² The lawyer’s summary of the Law is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4 (“you shall love the Lord your God”) and Leviticus 19:18 (“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”). However, the Deuteronomic Code (i.e., the book of Deuteronomy) centers in its entirety upon love of neighbor, for the entire book is about how Israel will order and live out its life together so that all its people are treated justly, with economic equity and with compassion.

By his endorsement (“You have given the right answer”), Jesus identifies himself and his ministry with the Deuteronomic code. This is the chief end of humanity. And to enable this to be lived out in both individual and corporate everyday life is that to which Jesus and his disciples are called. That is what the building of the kingdom of God is all about!

“But wanting to justify himself (and, presumably, his acceptance of the status, position and wealth of his standing in society built upon the backs of the poor, marginalized and vulnerable), the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (10:29) Jesus’ answer to this question is perhaps his most famous story – the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37).

The story is well known. A man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho where he is accosted by thieves, robbed and severely beaten. Three men pass the wounded man lying on the road – a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. The priest and Levite both ignore him. Only the Samaritan stops to help the man – and the help he gives is far more than one would expect. It includes taking the man to an inn to recuperate, and paying his bill. Jesus’ conclusion puts the issue directly to the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (10:36) The lawyer, not even able to say the words, “the Samaritan”, responds “The one who showed mercy”. And Jesus responds, “Go and do likewise” (10:37).

Two truths present themselves in this story. First, the Deuteronomic Law calls upon the Israelite to assist his neighbor in distress. “If there is among you anyone in need, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (Deut. 15:7-8). The Law required Israelites to eject from their assembly any Ammonite or Moabite “even to the tenth generation” (or, in other words, forever), not because they rejected the worship of Yahweh, but “because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt” (Deut. 23:3-4). The Law required the provision of assistance to any Israelite in distress, no matter what the circumstances or danger might be!

The priests were the official practitioners of the Law. The Levites (including the lawyers) were the official interpreters of the Law. If there were any two people traveling down that road to Jericho that day who would have known the Law’s requirements and would be expected to obey them, it would have been that priest and Levite. And yet, in Jesus’ parable, they are precisely the people who break the Law because it is inconvenient or dangerous or a burdensome task.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, was a “resident alien” (Deut. 26:12; Lev. 19:18) in the land. To the Jews, the Samaritan symbolized the accommodation and compromise of those in their midst who should have defended the Israelite life style, but instead chose to marry Babylonians, Canaanites and other pagans during the Babylonian captivity (596 – 539 BCE), and thus compromised both the Jewish faith and people.

Yet it was a Samaritan, in Jesus’ story – one who was outside the Mosaic Law – who was the one who obeyed the Law to its greatest extent. In fact, he did more than simply obey

its regulations, but went the “second” and “third mile” with the victim (Luke 6:27-36; Mt. 5:38-42) to not only provide him emergency care but getting him permanent care and investing his money in that care – so that not only was the letter of the Law obeyed, but its spirit, as well.

It is important to realize that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not a gentle story about compassion. It is a powerful political statement, for it illustrates that those who are responsible for the administration of the Law (priests, Levites and lawyers) are the ones most guilty of breaking the Law, while those who are least obligated to follow the Law (Samaritans, the Jewish peasants) are those who follow it fully, and are therefore closest to the kingdom of God. And the political power of this story is not lost on the lawyer in question, for he cannot even make himself name the Samaritan when he is forced to reply. He can only obliquely refer to him (“he who showed mercy”). But the story stands as an indictment on the lawyers, Levites and priests who control Israel’s systems – and the lawyer knows it!

The second truth contained in this parable is found in Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question. The question the lawyer asked of Jesus was “Who is my neighbor” (10:27b)? Jesus never answers that question! Instead, Jesus twists the man’s question and condemns his exploitation of Israelite society by asking another question, “Who is neighbor to those who are in trouble” (vs. 26)?

The question is not, “Who is my neighbor?” The correct question needs to be, “To whom am I to be neighbor?” When one answers the question, “Who is my neighbor?” one is in essence saying “Only those people and groups whom I choose to accept as neighbor are those to whom I need to assume responsibility”.

That answer must – by the very nature of the question – exclude some sorts of people. This was what the systems of both Rome and Israel were designed to do – to divide neighbors into enemies and thus make them dependent upon the systems to protect them from each other while making those systems dominant. The Romans only had to be neighbor to those who bore Roman citizenship; all the rest were subjects and conquered people to be exploited and used to build Rome’s wealth, power and control. The Jewish religious leaders (including priests, Levites and lawyers) had to be neighbor only to those who were a part of their elite (the priest or Levite would likely have stopped and helped if the beaten man had been a priest or Levite). All the rest of Israel were despised commoners, existing to serve the systems out of fear for the eternity of their souls or out of the desire to make no waves. Jesus, therefore, wisely refuses to answer the lawyer’s question, because to answer it would be to participate in the sustaining of the systems as they were organized to dominate and control the people.

Instead, what Jesus does is to turn the question around. He asks, through the use of the story of the Good Samaritan, “To whom are you called by God to be neighbor?” And the story answers that question. You are to be neighbor to anyone who is in need – whether that person is a powerful part of the systems or one of its victims, whether upper class or lower class, whether Jew or Gentile. You are to be the neighbor, not they you! And in

that way, and in that way alone, is the Law truly fulfilled, “You are to love your neighbor as you love yourself and God” (10:29).

Colossians 1:1-14 begins a letter of Paul’s to the church in the city of Colossae, a city he had never visited. He writes to them at the behest of their founding pastor, Epaphras, who is with Paul in his imprisonment in Rome (cf. 4:12; Acts 28; Col. 4:12-13). Apparently, the Colossian church is in turmoil over a new doctrine that has been introduced to them, and which is confusing their life together and witness within Colossae. It is hard to discern the particulars of this invading heresy, because Paul’s letter is less a rebuttal of the heresy (as it was in Galatians) and is more a presentation of those biblical doctrines that would counter the heresy. As best as we can deduce, this heresy seems to be a precursor of Gnosticism, with a worship of spirits, angelic beings and the “elemental spirits of the world” (2:8, 20); it may have prized ecstatic speech, apocalyptic prophecy, disengagement from public life and pietism. Paul provides a corrective for such teaching by nuancing a biblical understanding of power and by calling the church to an engagement with the world.

This letter begins by following the classic style of a Roman letter. Paul introduces himself and states his credentials (1:1), indicates to whom the letter is written (1:2a), greets his audience (1:2b) and then writes words of commendation to them (vss. 3-8). A typical Roman letter would say something congratulatory or complimentary to the intended audience in its second paragraph (immediately following the address and greeting). Paul uses this format to praise the church “for (all) we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (vss. 4-5). He congratulates the Colossian Christians for their trust in Christ, their selfless concern for each other, and the hope they have in Christ. Faith, hope and love are the central realities of solid Christian life to Paul (cf. Rom. 5:2-5; I Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6; I Thess. 1:3; 5:8). But these are gifts of God rather than virtues produced by Christians. Faith, hope and love are the inevitable outcome in the lives of Christians and of the church of God’s sovereign action in their lives (Eph. 1:4; 2:8), not something they manufacture! That these characteristics are in such abundance in the church in Colossae, Paul is suggesting, is evidence of their maturity in Christ.

Paul then moves to his response to their maturing spirituality. “For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (vss. 9-10). Paul shares with the Colossian Christians that he prays regularly for them. But he also signals the directions this letter is going to take – emphases upon their gaining of a biblical knowledge of power and their engagement in public life.

The effective living of their lives in a pagan environment, Paul states, will come both by right action (i.e., engagement in public life) and by right theology (i.e., their gaining a biblical understanding of how God is at work through Christ in the world). Holding to a

foundational theology of power will make the Colossian Christians “strong with all the strength that comes from (Christ’s) glorious power” so that they are able “to endure everything, with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father” (vss. 11-12). God is able to do this continuing work within and through them, because “he has rescued you from the power of darkness and transferred you into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (vss. 13-14).

With these words, Paul has now created the setting where he can begin his biblical teaching on the nature and extent of the power God has invested in and through Jesus Christ. That teaching, in turn, will become the power at work in the Colossian church that enables them to work for the transformation of the city of Colossae into the kingdom of God. And we will begin to explore that teaching in next Sunday’s epistle lesson.

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