

Unless

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 23A

Amos 5:18-24

During the Great Depression, it was a challenge for many Americans to make ends meet, much less be able to give anything away to others in need. In the Appalachian Mountains, Presbyterian churches came up with a program called “God’s Acre” through which families were encouraged to set aside the income of one acre of their land to the work of the church.

A Presbyterian minister I know grew up in a large family on one of these Appalachian farms and participated in the God’s Acre program. One day a reporter writing an article about the program came to take a picture of his family with their pigs. The father and nine of the children were slopping the pigs and doing other work on the farm when they were called together for the picture. Some were so dirty, you could hardly tell where their clothes ended and their skin began. The picture was taken, the reporter left, and the family went back to work.

Years later, this minister was asked to speak at a church supper. Before he spoke, there was a slide presentation on the Appalachian poor. A succession of pictures of people in miserable situations was projected on the screen as a speaker added some commentary. Suddenly, to my friend’s shock and horror, there on the screen flashed a picture of his filthy family standing in a pig pen. No one made the connection except him, of course, but he was mortified.

Until that moment when the slide flashed on the screen, my friend had never thought of himself as having been poor. His family was no worse off than most of their neighbors, so why would he?¹

Long ago, there was a community that did not think of themselves as poor. They came to a new land and on their farms there they made a decent living. They had a tight community and considered everyone family. They called their land “the promised land” and they said that it flowed with milk and honey, even though it really didn’t. What mattered to them, though, was that this land was given to them by God. And because they lived for God, which meant living for each other, they knew deep joy and satisfaction.²

By the time of the prophet Amos, this poor but joyful community of people was known as the nation of Israel, and Israel’s fortunes had changed for the

¹ This story is told by George Anderson in his sermon “Amos’ Criterion,” delivered at Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia on July 6, 2008.

² Ibid.

better. Damascus, which had been ruling the Middle East by bullying smaller nations, was finally in decline, having been conquered by Assyria. This meant that finally, there was room for some expansion by smaller nations. Israel got in on the action, establishing trade routes, strengthening its military, creating new businesses. Unfortunately, the unprecedented prosperity and security that followed led to an increase in greed and injustice.

These people that had once seen themselves as a family started sorting out into rich and poor. And, as so often happens, the wealthy few seemed to keep getting wealthier while the poor kept getting poorer...often because of the ways the wealthy cheated them. But in the midst of all of this, everyone continued to worship God, to do all the things the members of this family of faith were supposed to do to show their gratitude, respect, and reverence to the One who had given them that land.

Enter the prophet Amos. Amos had a message to deliver from Israel's God and it wasn't, "job well done." Instead, the message Amos delivers from God is this: watch out. Because the Day of the Lord is coming, and it's not going to be what you expect.

Today we might associate the "Day of the Lord" with the second coming of Jesus, but this was back before the first coming. The Day of the Lord was not the end times, it was the time when God was going to get involved with humanity in a whole new way and set things right once and for all. But according to Amos, the Israelites, especially the wealthy ones, were in for a nasty surprise when the day of the Lord finally arrived.

And this is just the beginning of the bad news Amos has for Israel. Because not only is the future not going to turn out the way that expect, but they've got some messed up ideas about the present as well. They think they know exactly how to worship, with the right kinds of grain offerings and animal sacrifices, with their anthems and harp music. But according to Amos, God wants nothing to do with it. God has no interest in their worship services, no matter how closely they follow the laws of ritual and sacrifice.

And God has no interest because, according to Amos, unless your actions outside of worship reflect your actions during worship, you may as well not bother.

Unless our everyday lives line up with our theology, with the God we profess in worship, then it turns out we don't need to bother with worship at all.

Years ago, the great theologian William Sloan Coffin was on a political talk show with Henry Kissinger, while Kissinger was Secretary of State. At one point in

their conversation, Coffin said to Kissinger, "Henry, you have to remember what the Old Testament says: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" Kissinger responded, "How are we supposed to do that?" Coffin replied, "It's my job to say it. It's your job to figure out the irrigation system."

Maybe you've seen the image that has popped up in a number of places lately. It's a pair of street signs showing the intersection of faith and politics, and it is often used to introduce an article or a webinar discussing exactly what that intersection is. Well, Amos reminds us here that to think of faith and politics as two different pathways that occasionally intersect is to get it all wrong. Because faith is supposed to be the thing that propels us out of the church and into the community, where we are each called to find ways to irrigate our daily lives and our communities with the waters of justice and righteousness. According to Amos, unless we live for God by living for others, what we do in church doesn't matter at all.

Will Willimon was once the pastor of a small church in a changing neighborhood. The church had long been losing members and so they decided it was time to embark on a new effort of evangelism. One Sunday after worship, a handful of brave souls gathered together, and Willimon heard someone tell two elderly women, Sarah and Mary, to go down Summit, turn right, and start knocking on doors.

A couple of hours later, after many discouraging conversations, the band of evangelists returned to the church and shared their stories. People hadn't answered their doors, others hadn't wanted to talk about church, others already had a church home and weren't interested in hearing about a new one.

Then, in walked Sarah and Mary, breathless and excited. "We went down Summit," they said, "and then we turned left and started knocking on doors."

"Wait a minute," Willimon interrupted. "You were supposed to go down Summit and then turn right, not left." "Yeah," someone else chimed in, "you weren't supposed to go into that neighborhood. That's the projects!"

"Well, anyway," Mary and Sarah went on, "there were lots of people who didn't answer the doors or who weren't interested, but there was this one lady -- Verlene. She came to the door and she had two little kids and we told her about our church and she said she was just desperate and we told her that was just the kind of person we needed at our church! We invited her to come to the

Wednesday morning Ladies' Bible study!" Mary and Sarah were beaming, but everyone else looked skeptical.

"What about the kids?" someone asked. "We told her to bring them," they said. "We said we'd provide childcare."

And sure enough, on Wednesday morning, Verlene showed up at the church, kids in tow. The Bible study that day was about temptation and after they had read the passage, Willimon asked the women to share about a time they had faced temptation. At first, no one spoke. Then one lady told about going to the grocery store the day before and discovering in the parking lot that she had a loaf of bread in her bag she hadn't paid for. "At first I wasn't going to do anything about it," she said. "I mean, really, is one loaf of bread going to make or break that big store? But I knew I had to do the right thing, so I went back and returned it."

Everyone around the table nodded their approval. Then Verlene spoke up. "Well, there was this one time," she started. "I was living with this guy, not the father of my second child, but the man before that, and we were doing a lot of coke, you know, and that stuff it really messes with your head, and one day we needed some cash, and he talked me into robbing this little service station. And we went in and he put a gun to the man's head and we made out with about \$200...easy as taking candy from a baby. But something about it just didn't feel right to me. Then a few weeks later, he came up with another plan to rob a convenience store. And I thought about it and I just couldn't do it. I told him no, I'm not going to do it. And he beat the hell out of me. But that was the first time in my life I said no to anybody, about anything. It was the first time in my life I felt like somebody."

And Willimon said, "Oh, okay, well, I think it's time for us to pray now."

Later, in the parking lot, Mary said to Willimon, "Wow, your Bible study just got a whole lot more interesting. I'm going to go home and get on the phone, because I think I can get a crowd there. I mean, this is good, this is good stuff."

Willimon said, "Look, you were told to go down Summit and turn right, not left!"

And Mary said, "Pastor, *I am as bored with this church as you are.* I think Verlene was sent to us by God to remind us what the gospel is really about. I believe I can get a crowd for this."

One of the things the last eight months of living in a global pandemic has taught us is that most of us, regardless of location or denomination, had become

pretty attached to the ways we worshipped. For the most part, we had control over it. We planned for it, rehearsed for it, made sure on Sunday mornings that everything in the sanctuary was polished and perfect and ready to go – the bulletins and flowers, the envelopes and offering plates. Then, the unthinkable happened, and we could no longer gather in our sanctuaries. And whether your church is back together now or continuing to worship together at a distance, we all learned something from that experience – and hopefully what we learned was the very thing Amos was trying to teach the Israelites who had become so complacent in their worship and in their living, and the same thing Verlene taught Will Willimon’s church: that God expects more from God’s people than worship that is predictable and controlled and polished to perfection. God expects worship to inspire us to create the community God had in mind when God created humanity and called us into life together, the community Jesus taught about in parables and sermons, what he called the kingdom of God. God expects that kingdom to be filled with people whose worship inspires them to be conduits of the mighty waters of justice and righteousness, to live the faith that we profess, to live for God by living for others.

The question, of course, is *how*. And to that question there are no easy answers. But throughout the Bible, from the Hebrew prophets to Jesus and the first apostles, we get a glimpse of a community that invites people to focus on “we” instead of “me.” Depending on your particular situation this could look drastically different, but this is a something Amos desperately wanted God’s people to recognize: that when we give in to the temptation of focusing on **my** needs and **my** desires, **my** family’s safety and security, **my** comfort, rather than considering the needs of the whole community – even of those I don’t know, even of those I don’t like – when we give into the temptation to focus on **me** instead of **we**, then there is a deep disconnect between the God we worship and the God of our daily lives.

According to Amos, what God wants most is for us to let go, to cling just a little less tightly to our security, our comfort, our money, our time, our opinions, even the ways of worship we cherish so deeply. God longs for us to swim in the rushing waters of justice and righteousness, to let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit, to live for God by attending to the deep and urgent needs of our fellow human beings. Unless we do this, our worship rings hollow, it is simply not pleasing to God. But when our worship propels us to be bearers of justice and compassion and mercy in a world that desperately needs them, when we live for

God by living for each other, we might just catch a glimpse of God's kingdom, the kingdom Jesus promised is always within our reach. Amen.

—*Amy Starr Redwine* © 2020