

Dick & Vivian Ben  
Sybil's daughter

A Word of Warning  
~~Mumb Line Theology~~

July 19

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on July 12, 1998. Scripture lesson: ~~Amos 7:7-17, Amos 9:1-12~~

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Someone shared with me a news clipping yesterday about a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh. It's extremely wealthy; its endowment is over 20 million dollars. The Rev. Peter Bower was installed pastor in October of 1996. At a meeting on April 26, 1998, one and a half years later, the congregation voted to oust him. There were no charges of wrongdoing. No scandal. Complaints focused on his style and personality! He preached too much about sin. He lacked the social sophistication appropriate to a congregation where the ushers wear cutaway morning coats with tails. So the congregation voted Bowers out. But Presbyterian church polity requires the Presbytery to approve the congregation's action. Pittsburgh Presbytery met for 3 hours at a specially called meeting last week to discuss the matter. At the end of the meeting the Presbytery refused to approve the ouster and appointed an administrative commission to help the congregation resolve its internal disputes. Good for the Presbytery! Rev. Bowers reminds me of the prophet Amos. Amos lived about 750 B.C. Wealth / Prosperity / Poverty & Social Injustice Wealthy and powerful people in Israel tried to send him packing back to Judah from where he came. He preached too much about sin. He lacked social graces. He minced no words. "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land."

As a small child in the late forties I remember riding the bus into Wilmington with my mother. As the bus drove down front street near the railroad station I saw men sitting on the curb. Some wore ties with ragged jackets. Some joked and talked with one another. Most just kind of stared. "last word, First Five 0" "What are those men doing?" "They don't have jobs." That night my dad was in a bad mood, "Unemployment's up. You just watch. Those birds in Washington will start a war with somebody. That's the way they deal with unemployment."

Another memory from about the same time. I was standing with my dad by the soda machine in a corner grocery store in the Polish section of Wilmington. It was an old fashioned soda machine where you opened the lid of the cooler and slid the glass bottle by its neck along a

steel track and then pulled it out. Dad got us both a sarsaparilla. We leaned against the machine and drank our sodas. Dad held up his bottle and said, "I could buy this two cents cheaper at that new super market." Back then super markets were rare and most city people shopped in small grocery stores. "Why don't we go there if they're cheaper?" I asked. He was hoping I'd ask. He pointed with the soda bottle to the owner behind the counter. *A little Polish man whose account I couldn't understand.* "When I got laid off we didn't have much money. I came in here and my polish friend said, "Acky, your family needs to eat. Take what you need. Pay me back when you get work." Then dad said, "Nobody knows me at that new big super market. All they care about is profits. They'll sell cheap until they put the little guy out of business then they'll hike their prices. And if I lose my job nobody at the super market is going to say, 'Take what you need until you get a job.'

But what happens when people have no roots in a community? What happens when they no longer know the people they do business with or live next door to, when they get transferred here one year and there the next without ever being able to put down roots? People come and go and we never get to know our neighbors. Many people have no local family or friends or roots or support system. We become so individualistic that we no longer know our neighbors or care about them. What happens when people lose their jobs today? Will there be a little corner Polish grocery store where they can get food? I heard an interview with a psychologist on the radio last week. He's hired by large corporations to counsel employees who spend weeks and months away from their families on business. Divorce rates are climbing among these traveling employees. Corporations pay psychologists big money to help workers adjust to this disruptive lifestyle. Then the interviewer asked: "Do the psychologists ever raise the question as to why the corporations find it necessary to contribute to the destruction of families by moving employees around so much?" The answer: "The psychologists don't question people who are paying them. The bottom line is profits."

"Look at the basket of fruit," the Lord tells Amos. Now listen to what the Lord says, "The end has come. The dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place." I see the dead bodies cast out in every place; dead bodies of young children lying in high school lobbies; dead

bodies stacked up in the killing fields of Bosnia, Algeria, and Rwanda; dead bodies of infants found in dumpsters. And I wonder if we're not ripe, like a basket of summer fruit, for God's judgment.

"Now listen you who trample on the needy" Amos preaches. Two weeks ago we saw needy people in Appalachia. They need jobs. Some need father or mother. They need self respect. <sup>And Jesus reminds us that the one thing we all need is him & His word.</sup> They need Jesus every bit as much as we do. Their needy faces remind me of the photographs taken by Dorothea Lange back in the 1930s for the *Farm Security Administration*. And I think of faceless corporations who come into Appalachia, exploit cheap labor, pollute the air and water, and then move on. <sup>Nikhistan You who trample on the needy</sup> And I see Indonesia children sewing *Nike* shoes for wealthy Americans. I go into a store and find a nice sport jacket. It's cheap. I look at the label. "*Made in the Republic of China.*" I say to Kay, "Made in the Republic of China by slave labor" and move on to another rack made by union workers. The needy are trampled and the poor of the land are ruined. And I wonder if we're ripe for God's judgment.

"Hear this, you that sell the sweepings of wheat." The Old Testament law required farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested for the poor. Some farmers, eager for more money, ignored God's law, reaped the corners of the fields and sold the sweepings that were meant for the poor. Since welfare reform government surplus food has grown more scarce. Distributions have been cut dramatically.

John Stott writes that there are only two possible attitudes Christians can adopt toward the needy world: "One is escape and the other is engagement. The first is to turn our backs on it in rejection, the second is to turn our faces toward it in compassion. The first is to wash our hands of it and find, like Pontius Pilate, that the responsibility does not come off in the wash. The other is to find our hands dirty and sore and worn in its service. The first is to steel our hearts against its agonized cries for help. And the second is to feel stirring deep within us a love of God which cannot be contained."

The poor among us include the most vulnerable. According to Michael Harrington, children constitute the poorest age group in the United States. Homelessness has increased most

among families. In 1997, 25 percent of the urban and rural homeless were children. Most of the poor in the United States are white, but people of color of all ages are disproportionately poor. Farmers have a higher poverty rate than any other group in the United States. The money our church gives to *Neighborhood Services Center* and the money we raise every year for the *CROP* walk - we don't give in order to be acceptable to God. In Christ we're accepted already. We do it because Christ wants us to. Acting in faith in the midst of need lends credibility to what we proclaim about Christ.

Then the Lord said to Amos, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by." Words of judgment! In a few short years Israel was destroyed by Assyria. But I also hear a word of hope. As a Christian I interpret those words Christologically. I hear not so much a threat as a promise. And I pray to God that God will not pass us by.

Pass me not O gentle savior,  
Hear my humble cry;  
While on others thou art calling,  
Do not pass me by.  
Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry,  
While on others thou art calling, Do not pass me by.

Do not pass us by. Come near us, Lord! Heal our land! Heal our neighbors! Heal us! We don't know the answers to poverty and violence and unemployment and injustice. You know. You have the answers. Challenge us. Trouble us. Disturb us. But do not pass us by. Come to us, hear our prayer and heal our nation, our families, our friends and our enemies. Heal us, smite us and save us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.