

The Silence of the Prudent

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 1989 (meeting in Oxford Area High School). Scripture Lessons: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 101; Luke 19:37-40.

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

Amos was a farmer from a little town named Tekoa. Every once in a while he'd go to the big city of Bethel up North... maybe to sell his produce and wool. The big city was so different from his little home town.

Whenever he went up there he'd come back home with all sorts of horror stories. He ~~wouldn't be able to~~ ^{couldn't} sleep at night thinking about what he'd seen and experience. He'd toss and turn and talk with his wife about it.

"You just can't believe what that city's like. You should see the homes those rich people live in up there... the luxury... the waste. What they throw away could feed our whole little town. And you should see all the homeless people. They work, but they can't make enough money to rent an apartment or buy a home. My heart just aches for them but nobody else seems to care."

He'd fall silent for a few minutes and just when his wife was about to fall asleep he'd continue, "And the corruption of the officials... the bribes... owners of apartments bribe the fire inspectors when their tenement houses are fire-traps and they pass inspection. There are two systems of law up there in Bethel; one for the rich and one for the poor. If you have enough money and know the right people and slip them the ~~right amount of~~ ^{some} money you can get away with ~~anything~~ ^{murder}."

Silence again. His wife finally manages to fall asleep but Amos is still tossing and turning. He's thinking about God. Amos trusted in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He remembered the stories passed down from generation to generation about how God had delivered them from slavery in

Egypt and how that was meant to affect their treatment of their servants. He remembered how Israel wandered homeless in the desert and, because of that, how God wanted his people to treat the stranger and the homeless with compassion. He remembered the Law God gave his people and how God promised to bless them if they obeyed and warned that he'd curse them if they disobeyed.

Then Amos thought about the worship services he'd attended up there in Bethel. He compared the simple little place where his family worshiped with the beautiful and richly decorated royal sanctuary in Bethel. The pews were always filled with well dressed worshippers. They never missed a Sabbath, but somehow they missed the message. They were deaf to the Word of God and what it said about their responsibilities to the rest of society. Their religion seemed to have nothing to do with simple justice. Religion was in one hermetically sealed compartment of life and business was in another. Amos found this incredible. For him, God was concerned with every area of life.

The next time Amos went up to Bethel he lost his cool. The Lord laid upon him a message that he simply couldn't keep to himself. This farmer who had no theological education... no courses in preaching... stood up in the royal chapel ^{during joyous ceremonies} and castigated the worshippers for being complacent compromisers who were really ignoring the Lord.

"Go to the Lord, and you'll live. If you don't go, he'll sweep down like fire on the people of Israel. The fire will burn up the people of Bethel, and no one will be able to put it out."

"You come here to the royal chapel in Bethel with the hope of getting a glimpse of the king of Israel, but you fail to see the King of Glory. You come here and sacrifice and go away and still justice is perverted, the

poor oppressed."

"Seek good, not evil that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts."

This book of Amos is powerful. Go home and read it and let the Word of God challenge you. I've thought a lot about how to approach this passage. Four themes jumped out at me and begged to be preached. I'll deal with them very briefly.

First, how God can use you lay people to change society. Amos was a layperson. He wasn't ordained. He had no theological education. But he knew God.

I think of a middle aged Black woman. She'd spent all day cleaning the home of a wealthy family and now she's headed home. She's tired. She doesn't have a car. She has to ride a bus. She gets on the bus and she's so tired she sits down in the first empty seat. The year was 1954 and the woman's name is Rosa Parks and it was against the law for a Black person to sit in the front of a bus. If you were Black you had to sit in the back of the bus. Like Amos, Rosa had no theological education but she knew the Lord. She hadn't been reading any revolutionary literature except the Bible. When she was asked to move to the back of the bus she said, "No! I'm tired. I'm not going to move." By that act she changed American society. Like Amos, she called our nation to be true to what was the best and highest in our heritage and history. People are far more likely to listen to a layperson take a stand for justice than they're likely to listen to the pronouncements from our General Assembly.

Second, when I read the prophecy of Amos I'm reminded that the Bible abounds with expressions of concern for justice and the welfare of the

poor. I have a tendency in my preaching to deal with Biblical passages that comfort and assure us of God's grace and forgiveness and presence. But Amos reminds me that the Lord has a lot to say about the poor, about justice and about the responsibilities God's people have towards those who have very little.

In spite of the noble affirmations of Christianity, the church has often lagged in its concern for social justice and too often has been content simply to make pious statements.

Third, Amos tells us something about being silent when we should be speaking out. He says, "the one who is prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time." Amos is being sarcastic. He's saying there's a lot of people who should be speaking out but their not because they're scared. It may be prudent to remain silent in the face of injustice but it's certainly not courageous. Sometimes prudence isn't the best policy.

I think of the words of Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran pastor in the days of Hitler. He wrote, "In Germany they came first for the Communists, but I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews... and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists... and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics... and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me... and there was no one left to speak up." But Niemoller didn't remain silent. He did something very courageous, but imprudent. With no one left to defend him he started speaking up and he spent seven years in a concentration camp.

Fourth, how easy it is to put our ^{for us, like the worshippers in Bethel} Christian faith in one compartment of life that has nothing to do with everyday living. I think of the serial killer, Ted Bundy, a brilliant law student who was executed several

months ago. Before his execution he was interviewed by James Dobson, a well-known Christian author. Bundy shared how he was raised in a Christian home... how he went to church. He knew the Bible. He knew what was right and wrong. He didn't come from some underprivileged, poverty stricken home. He had a good family. And yet he ended up murdering women in cold blood, with no apparent motive. How could this happen?

He said that somehow he could compartmentalise his life. In one compartment of his life he was a charming, polite young man who attended church and put his offering in the collection plate. In another compartment of his life he was a serial killer. He could go from one compartment of his life into another and never let what happened in one compartment influence what he did in the other compartments.

How easy it is to put our faith in Christ in one compartment of life so that it has no affect on the way we vote, the way we spend our money, the way we treat other people.

Now, how'm I going to end this sermon? Maybe the best way is simply to let you hear once more what Amos said, "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the GOD of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious...."

Let us pray : O God of justice, when corruption abounds and Christians grow cynical; when racism is rampant and Christians seek their own interests; when consciences are stifled and it's safer to keep silent... call out your prophets. Give them courage to speak, clarity in doing so, and a fire in their souls, which will not let them be silent; by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Father, we come to you now in silence, overawed by the thought of your love for us. You rule over time and space, yet you loved us so much that you gave your only Son to suffer and die for us. To think that you love us like strikes us dumb. There's nothing we can say. And yet we can't remain silent when we think of your love for us. You gave us a new birth through faith in Christ. You free us from the guilt and shame of the past, and make us confident that nothing in death or life can separate us from your love. Accept our worship and praise both silent and spoken, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

For Laypeople, like Amos. Pour your blessing upon laypeople of your church, in this country and in all lands. May they grasp your majesty and might; fill them with your Spirit, that the Church today, like the early Church, may preach and live the Gospel of Christ in eagerness, power and love.

For the nations... especially Hungary and East Germany.

For the sick & suffering... ~~the homeless... the old~~