

The Promotion Of Social Righteousness

Scripture: Amos 3

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

The Fifth great end of the church is the promotion of social righteousness. The first half of this sermon tells a story about how my father influenced me with respect to my attitudes towards social righteousness. In the second half I will relate this story to the story that the Bible tells us about the spiritual family into which we are adopted when we're baptized into Jesus Christ.

My father was born in 1893. After his mother died, his father remarried a woman who became, for my father, a wicked step-mother. He quit school in sixth grade and ran away from home. He got on a boat in Philadelphia, hid among livestock, and got off in Wilmington. He got a job as a farm hand in Newark. From the age of 13 he was on his own.

In 1913 he joined the Army, became an officer, got married in 1918 and went to France a week later to bring WW1 to an end. When he came back he got a job shoveling coal as a fireman on steam locomotives. It was back-breaking labor 10, 12, 14 hours a day. My mother claimed that he'd eat eight eggs for breakfast along with scrapple and toast to give him energy to shovel coal.

At that time he got paid very little for his hard labor. He became angry at the injustice of working so hard without receiving a fair share of the profits. He became a quite radical, in fact. He believed that workers should share equally with management in the profits the workers made possible. The idea of the Chief Executive Officer of a corporation getting a huge salary increase at the same time workers are being laid off would have enraged my father.

I can remember him repeating the words of St. Paul, "If any would not work, neither should he eat (2 Th. 3:10)." Only he didn't apply that to people on welfare. He applied it to anyone who lived off the inheritance of their parents and didn't have to work. He had this really crazy idea, which I don't agree with, that children should not be able to inherit their parent's wealth because it undermined the work ethic. Everybody should start out at the bottom.

In the 1920's and 1930's he and other workers organized and formed a brotherhood. They began to demand better wages and working conditions. Sometimes the railroad would hire goons to bet up workers who wanted to organize. I can remember as a young boy in the 1940's going to meetings with my father in dimly lit back rooms. I looked around and saw Italian and Polish workers, with greasy hands and heavy accents. The pungent smell of cigar smoke filled the room. And I heard them say a lot of things that reminded me of the prophet Amos.

When I reread the prophecy of Amos last week I heard the voice of my father and his friends. "The trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way."

During The Great Depression my father sometimes was on the shady side of the law to make money to keep my family together. The railroad required my dad to have so they could call him when needed. He sometimes let a bookie use our telephone for a small fee. He'd also get my brother up before dawn and they'd drive to Southern Delaware to buy boxes of oranges and apples and bananas. Then they'd drive back to Wilmington and illegally sell the fruit from door to door without a vendor's license. My brother tells about having to run down the street and hiding when the police drove by. My father knew that hunger, poverty and unemployment can lead people to crime.

My father, like Amos, had no use for religious rituals. But he was a believer. He trusted in Christ as his Lord and Savior and worshipped every week with about 20 other men and women in the living room of a home in Wilmington. The only religious symbolism was a table, a loaf of bread, a cup and a bottle of wine. There was no minister. The service was led by lay people. He well understood the concern of the prophet Amos, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

When my brother and two sisters were growing up in the 1920's and 1930's my family lived in a shack with no hot or cold running water, no toilet, shower or bathtub. They had to use an outhouse. But as the nation came out of the Depression my family's living conditions improved.

My father became a locomotive engineer. He began to build a nice two story home and was very proud to have hot and cold running water, an inside flush toilet and a bathtub. When he ran out of money a Jewish liquor store owner in Wilmington, whom I knew as Izzy, gave my father a blank check to go out and buy whatever he needed to finish the house. Because of the relationship my father had with all sorts of people I never heard ethnic jokes that put down Jews, African Americans, Poles or Italians.

I never experienced the poverty conditions that my parents, brother and sisters did. But my father never wanted me to forget that I belonged to a family that had been poor and poorly housed and a victim of an unjust economic and social system. He told me stories that will forever be etched in my memory. He knew that the nice house and good job he had were not entirely a result of his hard work. He knew he hadn't pulled himself up by his own boot straps. He knew that what he had was the result of belonging to a community, a brotherhood, who stood up for another and helped one another when anyone was down and out without a job. He knew that a lot of other people are poor, not because they're lazy, but because they don't have adequate jobs.

The stories he told reminded me of who I was. No matter how well educated I got, no matter how affluent I became and no matter what my social status, I must never forget the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the victims of injustice. They were our people.

Now I want to relate this to the story the prophets told over and over to the people of God. Amos said, "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt (Amos 3:1)." God wants his people to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt, and victims of injustice. The Bible is filled with stories to remind us of who we are as God's people so that we won't forget God and so we won't forget the poor and homeless and victims of injustice

When we were baptized into the Christian church we were baptized into a family whose ancestors were slaves and victims of racism. It doesn't matter if your parents were rich or middle-class; it doesn't matter if you're well educated and have a secure job, it doesn't make any

difference if you're red or yellow, black or white, when you were baptized into Christ you entered God's family which once lived as slaves in Egypt.

The church in the United States, with all our prestige and affluence, is prone to forget that we were slaves. We were the victims of injustice. And whenever we forget we end up despising the poor, the homeless, the afflicted, the powerless and those who have no voice and we end up shutting them out unintentionally from our worship services.

We live at a time when racism and racial injustice is on the increase. Minorities, immigrants, the poor, the homeless and refugees are easy victims. Think of how racism may have contributed to Jeffrey Dahmer's crime. A black woman called the police because she saw a naked Asian youth running and screaming from Dahmer. The police investigated and laughed off the incident as a spat between two lovers. Dahmer took the boy back to his apartment and killed him.

But what if the black woman who called had been a well educated, middle class, white man. And what if Dahmer had been as Asian and the young man who was running away, a blonde haired, blue eyed boy. Do you really think the police would have just laughed off the incident? As Amos said, "they abhor the one who speaks the truth."

After World War 2, Bishop Niemoller, a German Lutheran pastor who lived through the rise of Hitler and was finally imprisoned as a member of the Confessing church that opposed Hitler, said, "When the Nazi Gestapo came for the trade-unionists I was silent because I was not a member of a union. When they came to take away the Jews, I was silent, because I was not a Jew. When they came to take away the homosexuals I was silent because I was not a homosexual. When came to take away the Roman Catholics I was silent because I wasn't a Roman Catholic. And so when they came to take me away there was no one left to speak for me."

The task of the church is to speak up and promote social righteousness not to the exclusion of the preaching of the Gospel but in addition to the preaching of the Gospel. We'll have the courage to do this only if we keep telling the story, keep reminding our children of our heritage, that we were once slaves and victims of injustice and how the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ

delivered us. We're not where we are today because of hard work but only by the grace of God. God saved us and brought us into a supportive community. Because we know who we are and who God is we know we have a primary responsibility to promote social righteousness. To let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Let us pray: O God of love, who has always required that people should be just: forgive our complacency and lack of care; for burying our heads and believing that all is well with the poor, the hungry, and the handicapped. Open our eyes to the injustice around us, and help us to give up ourselves, our time, our comfort and our possessions, in the service of others and of yourself; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.