

We are Justice-Seeking Waters

Amos 1:1-2, 5:10-15; 21-25

November 12, 2017

The glow of the white lights draped on the bare tree branches lining the street could not distract me from the cold. My fingers were icicles, my cheeks were frozen and I all wanted to do was find reprieve inside for a bit. But it was December 15th, and the shops where my friend Sara and I wanted to purchase gifts at were blocks away! And so I turned my attention to the beauty of the buildings surrounding me as I, along with many others, walked into the bitter wind with determination and delight. The joy of Christmas shopping along the Magnificent Mile on North Michigan Avenue! It was such a glorious, rich setting, so filled with abundance — abundance of people, of lights and sounds, and of wealth — that it was easy to ignore the reminders of scarcity on the street corners.

The women and men who were not scurrying about but were settled under an awning, tucked away from the wind as much as possible, were waiting for anyone to slow down long enough to offer a bit of holiday cheer in the form of clanking coins and a compassionate smile. Women and men for whom December 15th was not as much a part of the Christmas countdown but another cold day on which they would struggle to stay warm. Women and men rich with dreams but poor in dollars.

The Israelites were living out their dreams of abundance in the time of the prophet Amos. Abundance that had come at the cost of the most vulnerable and in need. Unlike those camped on Michigan Avenue, in Israel the poor were not just ignored, they were exploited and hurt.

As detailed in chapter two of Amos, the Israelites forced slavery on those who had minor debts, selling them for silver: “they trample(d) the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push(ed) the afflicted out of the way...and they engaged in sexual exploitation of the voiceless (2:6-7). Amos, considered the earliest of the prophets, writing around 760 BCE, was given the unenviable task of telling the Israelites that their behaviors had angered God and they, as a nation, would soon be destroyed. Not exactly what any of the Israelites wanted to hear. And yet, this was Amos’ call.

Amos, like so many other prophets, was an odd choice for the role. As the opening Bible verses tell us, he was a shepherd from Tekoa, a town in the Southern kingdom of Judah. Given that profession, he was likely a member of the working class. We learn later in the book that he also worked with figs, another indication that he was an outside laborer, and an outsider in the political realm of Judah.

We can imagine his calloused hands and his preference to be alone with sheep as opposed to speaking in front of a crowd. In his role as prophet, Amos was a boundary crosser; he was speaking to the wealthy Israelites, not as one of them, but more like one of their poor subjects. In this way, perhaps Amos was uniquely suited to live out the call of the prophets: to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. In his ministry we get a foreshadowing of the work

that Jesus continued hundreds of years later — moving from town to town, a carpenter from Nazareth speaking out against the Roman empire. An outsider, critiquing the insiders. In Amos' time and in Jesus' this was not easy work, but it was essential.

The Israelites had lost their moral compass given by God through the Ten Commandments; they had forgotten the two-fold nature of the Holiness Code. It is not enough to worship faithfully (which they did continue to do, with great fanfare), but the Israelites also were called to care for the poor. As is told in Leviticus 19: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien..." (19:9-10).

In our text for today, God, speaking through Amos, reminds the Israelites of this law, and how they broke it: "...you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain..." (5:11). The Israelites can observe the ritual offerings, feasts and fasts until the end of time, but as long as they are not paired with care and justice for the poor, their acts of worship will be despicable to God. Not just hypocritical, but despicable. Why? Because God is first and foremost concerned for the poor, and those who do not show compassion to the poor cannot possibly offer authentic worship to God.

Speaking through Amos, God rails against the Israelites' rituals: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps" (5: 21-22).

What was once music to God, what once made the Creator's heart sing, has turned into noise. The notes remained the same, but the hearts of those who sang them had changed, had hardened to not feel the pain of God's children, their neighbors who were in need. As the Israelites' hearts hardened to the poor, God's heart hardened toward them. And yet, God still saw potential in his people, the people he had brought out of slavery and into new life. God reminded them what he sought from them: "...Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).

There were no ever flowing streams in the desert land of the Israelites. The best they could hope for was a wadi, a riverbed dry except after heavy rain. Flowing waters like the great Mississippi did not exist in their country. It was a powerful image in stark contrast to their reality. What would one do with so much water? What would one do with so much justice and righteousness? Create a community that God intends.

What high school did you go to? This is the question you ask anyone who is from St. Louis. Despite the metropolitan area having a population of nearly three million, the city retains its small town feel as folks connect by knowing what high school one another went to.

I went to Parkway West, one of four high schools in the Parkway school district. I was surprised to learn that Missouri Governor Eric Greitens went to Parkway North, just a few miles away. A fellow Parkway alum whose path following graduation was much different from mine.

Before becoming Governor, Eric Greitens served the country as a US Navy Seal and had two deployments in Iraq. After the second he visited Bethesda Marine hospital to talk with the veterans recovering there. He asked them, what do you want to do when you get better? They all said, "I want to return to my unit." Well, Eric knew that for some of them, that would be impossible. So he continued, "If you couldn't do that, what would you like to do?" Again, the responses were remarkably similar: "I would like to find a way to continue to serve my country."

Eric listened to these American heroes and had an idea — what if there was an organization that empowered veterans to continue to serve their country when they returned home, an organization that brought them together with other veterans to serve side by side, like they did as part of a military unit?

This idea became a reality in August of 2007 when Greitens began "The Mission Continues." "The Mission Continues" is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to partnering veterans with schools and organizations to create change for communities in need. The first veteran, Matthew Trotter, joined the community in November 2007. Today, there are thousands of veterans serving their communities through "The Mission Continues" program.

"....Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

As we know from the hurricanes of this year, water is incredibly powerful and damaging. But it is also life-saving. With gravity's help, it finds the lowest places and the driest places. Places that need water, places that people tend to ignore. Places like the street corners on Michigan Avenue, below the pretty lights and awesome buildings, places like warm, dry doorways and libraries, safe from the passing cars and weather, places where the poor reside. Places like Charles Hart Middle School, situated in the southeast corner of Washington D.C., in one of the poorest and lowest zip codes in the city.

One spring Saturday, 300 "The Mission Continues" volunteers came to Charles Hart with a huge goal: in one day they would paint 30,000 square feet inside the school building, plant a garden, build school benches, plant trees and clean the park. Charles Hart Middle school was a desert that was renewed by the waters of justice and righteousness of "The Mission Continues" volunteers. Those volunteers were justice-seeking waters on that Saturday. Through cleaning up that middle school they gave its students a chance to learn in a more peaceful environment, and they respected those students' right to have a clean school.

The members of Fourth Presbyterian Church, conveniently on North Michigan Avenue, are justice-seeking waters to those homeless men and women I saw that cold December Sunday when Sara and I did our Christmas shopping. At four o'clock that afternoon, and every Sunday, those without homes are invited to worship, shelter and a warm meal.

The doors open at four when the Jazz Vespers Service begins. After worship, everyone is invited downstairs for a delicious warm meal served to the guests at their seats. Those from the lowest places in our community find respite, nourishment and shelter in the church.

Friends, we too are justice-seeking waters. We are engaged and volunteer with dozens of organizations, locally, regionally and internationally. Last Sunday, representatives from many of them — The Night Ministry, Family Promise North Shore, Ember Kenya, the Hillside Pantry and the Appalachia Service Project, just to name a few — were in a filled Logan Hall, excitedly talking to us about their service endeavors and thanking us for our commitment to reach the low and dry places of our communities.

Unlike the Israelites that we find in Amos, here at Northminster we are partnering genuine worship with heartfelt service to bring justice and righteousness to the poor. We are justice-seeking waters. But the question remains, is each of us justice-seeking water?

This community of faith is filled with amazing people. And yet, even we have experienced something of the 80/20 rule, which is common in churches. About 80 percent of the ministry is done by about 20 percent of the people. In part this is for good reasons; within our community folks are in different seasons of life, some that include more responsibilities and obligations than others. Some are weary just trying to keep up with the necessities of life. And some are limited by health issues. But I wonder if in part this is because we don't feel equipped to do the ministry; we are uncertain that they will be good enough, and honestly we don't feel we have the time to learn to do it well.

On this commitment Sunday, in this season of the 500th anniversary of the reformation that at its core was about God's grace, I invite you to take hold of this gift freely given us! Clinging to God's grace, we know that it is not about us being good enough. Friends, it is about us being God's beloved children, just as God created us to be. It is about us responding to the love of God given to us by spreading it to a community that desperately needs it! It is about each of us and all of us being God's justice-seeking waters, to go to the low and dry places of the world and bring life-saving justice and righteousness. Not because of how great we are but because of how great God is, and how much we are loved. Each of us and all of us *are* created to be God's justice-seeking waters.

Let us close with a prayer: We are ever grateful to be yours, O God. Give us the courage to live out this truth: the responsibility to be justice-seeking waters in your name is ours. We love you. Amen.