

Pentecost 8C Proper 11 Sermon 071810
Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52
Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

In the name of the God who is always worthy of our praise, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

As I was preparing to write my sermon this week, I was thinking about Mary and Martha and how much that story has to say to us in this age of “faster is better,” hurry up, multi-tasking. Almost all Americans today have let their “Martha” overshadow their “Mary,” to the point where being still and knowing that God is God, is thought – in most circles – to be a bad thing. Yes. Martha and Mary can definitely teach us something today. But then I went back and looked at the Old Testament reading and determined that Amos’ message might be even more urgent today than Martha and Mary’s.

Somewhere around 750 years before the birth of Jesus, Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. He was a man of humble means who had no intent, nor any desire, to be a prophet of God. But God called him to prophesy – in other words to bring God’s Word to the people, in order to try to change their behavior. And Amos might have been a poor and uneducated man, but he could definitely see what was going on around him, and he certainly listened to God in order to deliver God’s message. The message Amos delivered was very specific and aimed at the wealthiest of Israel.

This, in small part, is the message that Amos preached:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, ‘When will the new moon be over

so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’

It’s a little difficult for us to get the full meaning of God’s words to Amos because of the huge differences between our culture and the culture of Ancient Israel. But what God was saying was: Listen you who take advantage of the disadvantaged; you who complain because you cannot sell your grain on Sundays; you who measure out your grain in false measurements and who use counterfeit coins for your change; you who seek to own the people who cannot afford to do business with you and you who sweep the floors and put the dirt and shavings into the grain you sell so that it will weigh more; here this – your time of cheating, stealing and otherwise dealing unfairly with people so that you can make a bigger profit are coming to an end.

Yes. Amos definitely has a message for us today.

In 750 BCE, God was angry because God’s “chosen people” the Israelites, were cheating each other in order to make a profit. God was angry because on-to-one business transactions were not being conducted fairly and the “little guy” had no way of getting a square deal. What would Amos think – and what must God think – today?

In Amos’ time people were being cheated by a penny or two so that the merchants could make that much additional profit. Last week JP Morgan Chase reported second

quarter earnings of \$4.8B. And after moving money around in-house, they had profits of nearly \$2B for the *second three months* of the year. They made those almost uncountable amounts of money in many and varied ways. But one of the ways that they did it was to borrow money at 0% interest and then charge consumers 29% on their credit card balances – while also charging people over limit fees because their own interest charges put the balance over the top, and collecting late fees by arbitrarily changing payment due dates. And JP Morgan Chase is not by any stretch of the imagination, the only one making profits this way. This coming week, BankAmerica and Citigroup will report their second quarter figures and they will have similarly performed, I bet.

What the major Wall Street banks are doing to the “little guy,” you know, you and me, these days is nothing new. Amos saw it in his day. And as a fan of the HBO series *The Sopranos*, I have seen how it’s done on the streets of New Jersey. No matter who does it, the deal is: the lender keeps pouring on the outrageously high interest so that the debt continues to grow even as its paid – making it impossible for the borrower to ever pay it off.

And banks are not the only culprits in today’s one sided economy. As the Gulf Coast still reels from the worst man-made ecological disaster in history, people in Louisiana have to panic because of a moratorium on new drilling in deep water. The people who have made their living doing the hard, dangerous work of off-shore drilling have to worry about how to feed their families, in the same way that the Gulf fishermen

do. And all the while, BP and the other multi-national oil companies continue to post multi-billion profits – EVERY QUARTER. Has BP offered to continue the wages of the people who might be laid off during a drilling moratorium? Not to my knowledge. If that's not equivalent to Amos' concern over selling people for silver I don't know what is.

And it costs almost \$12,000/yr to have Donna, Taylor and me on the Diocese's health insurance plan. \$1,000/month for a policy that has a \$5,500/yr deductible and an \$8,400/yr out of pocket expenditure before the insurance pays 100%. That's what the costs are to us "little guys" so that Cigna can post profits of almost \$1B/yr.

Now believe it or not, I am not a communist. I am not even a complete socialist. I have studied and understand both politics and capitalism. And I have a great appreciation for the fact that some entity, made up of an aggregate of individual investors, has to risk its capital in order to create businesses which employ people and put food on the table. I spent many years trying to maximize profit in a number of different arenas. But the question I am left with in the America of the second millennium is this: How much is enough?

How much profit is enough that the big guys can look down on the little guys and say, "Let's cut into on the earned income this quarter, be good corporate citizens and give something back."? When does the business, which has spent the last decade or more gouging people, look around and say, "Instead of what I've been doing, I've decided that

I can make a very comfortable living with a level playing field. No more cheating and no more naked greed”?

Amos heard these words from God:

The time is surely coming, . . . ,
when I will send a famine on the land;

This is not one of those sermons where you hear that God is about to reach down and smite the evildoers with bolts of lightning, or make some other calamity rain down on them. No. Instead, God said that the Word of the Lord would disappear from them, causing them to starve spiritually. My brothers and sisters in Christ, I would submit to you that that famine is already in place, and has been for a long time. People who hear the Word of God with the ears of their hearts cannot possibly treat other humans this way.

But the hope of the Gospel is still in play. What is it that was the “promised hope,” St. Paul talked about in the reading from Colossians? Why is it that we say Jesus brought hope to the poor – and not just to the poor in heart? As He said to the Disciples in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel:

(Matthew 25:31-40) ³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. . . . Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ . . . And (then) the king will (say), ‘Truly I

tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Making money is not a bad thing. Making so much money that it cannot be spent in multiple lifetimes by taking advantage of those who have nothing, is a bad thing, and will result in a spiritual famine and a life wasted. But it does not have to be that way. God drafted Amos, a simple, humble man, to speak out on these issues. As members of the household of God, it’s our turn now. Speak out against greed and corruption. Step up and care for those who cannot care for themselves. Fight the corrupt powerful who take advantage of the “small people” at every turn. It’s what Amos called on the people to do – and these times call for nothing less.

Amen.