

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, giver of wisdom and illumination. AMEN.

We have a couple of troubling readings this morning, don't we? In both Amos and the psalm, we read that God is judging and punishing Israel for their breaking the covenant with God. Let me set the stage as it were.

We are in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The kingdom of Israel has been split into two. The northern kingdom, Israel with their sacred place at Bethel and the southern kingdom, Judah with their sacred place at Jerusalem. Israel has once again turned their back on God and broken the covenant. The covenant which includes the famous 2 commandments we hear in our Gospel story this morning. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." Amos, as he says in our reading today, was not a prophet by profession nor the son of a prophet. He was a cattle herder and a tender of sycamore trees. He didn't even live in Israel; he was from the southern kingdom of Judah. And yet God chose Amos to prophesy to Israel and warn them of a coming judgment. Despite being a peasant farmer, the language of prophecy became poetry, unflinching, urgent, and profound. His words ring out with the authority not of royal lineage or priestly privilege, but of one who has seen injustice firsthand. Amos didn't just speak the truth, he sang it, in the rhythm of Hebrew couplets and refrains. Not just to make it pretty, but to make it plain. A way to drive the truth deep, so it couldn't be ignored. He condemned the moral and economic corruption of his day, decrying the ways the wealthy trampled the poor, and how the powerful forgot their covenantal obligations. In Amos, we hear the voice of a people's conscience, insistent that true faith must be lived out in justice and

compassion, words that still unsettle and inspire us. But, there were some very harsh phrases!

“See, I am setting a plumb line  
in the midst of my people Israel;  
I will spare them no longer;  
<sup>9</sup> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,  
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,  
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

When the priest from Bethel hears Amos, he commands him not to prophecy against Israel. He tells him to get back to Judah and prophecy there instead. I mean, who does Amos think he is? How dare he come to our country and call us to account! And God responds through Amos by doubling down.

“Therefore, thus says the Lord:  
Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,  
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,  
and your land shall be parceled out by line;  
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,  
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”

And that's exactly what happens just a few years later. Now I'm going to pause us there for just a minute. You see, much of the Hebrew scriptures were written within a framework of a particular theology. In this time and place, each nation had their own gods. And the nation who won a war or conquered another nation had the strongest god. Now with this in mind, there is no way that the God of Israel and Judah was a lesser god. Therefore, the only way that Israel and Judah

could be conquered was for it to be because God had allowed it. Why would God allow such a thing? Because they had broken the covenant and were not following in God's ways. Now, did it really happen that way? Was Israel conquered by Assyria and Judah by Babylon and both led away into captivity as punishment from God? I'm not sure about that at all! So how do I deal with these texts? I think that story is from humanity's perspective, not the creator God. I consider them as how the people of God understood God in that time and place and I look for where God's perspective, God's voice is breaking through that. Next week you will hear some more from Amos. Listen for the words of condemnation from the Lord God who calls out the Israelites for buying the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat, instead of allowing the poor to gather them. This is the loving and compassionate God I know.

We hear the same thing in the Psalm today as God calls out the elite of Israel:

<sup>3</sup> “How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?

<sup>3</sup> Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

<sup>4</sup> Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

Later in the reading from Amos next week you will also hear,

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,  
when I will send a famine on the land,  
not a famine of bread or a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

God does not seek to punish his people with a food famine, but to bring them back into covenant. He wants them to hunger for his words. What words are those?

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

The expert in the law in our story from Luke knew that to inherit eternal life, this is what he must do. And yet he wants to justify himself, to make himself righteous, so he asks Jesus, but who is my neighbour? Perhaps, this man had been caring for the poor, the orphaned and the widow of his fellow Jewish neighbours. He would probably be thinking of the many passages in the Hebrew scriptures where this was commanded and having done so, wanted the credit for it. But Jesus ups the ante. In his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates who the neighbour is when two religious Jews passed by a man robbed, beaten, and left by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite. Now in case you were thinking, “but I thought Levites were priests”; well, while all priests were Levites, not all Levites were priests, but did served in some capacity in the temple. Anyway, neither of these two stopped to help their fellow Jew, their neighbour. Instead, it was a Samaritan who stopped to care for the one robbed and beaten. The Samaritan who was not thought of as a fellow citizen, but an outsider, the Other, perhaps even an enemy. And Jesus holds up this person as the one who loves their neighbour! It's genius! Jesus could have told a story about a Samaritan who had been beaten and left for dead and a Jew came along and helped him. This would have clearly the defined neighbour, as all people. But no, Jesus takes it further. He flips the story, and the Samaritan is the example of the one following the great commandment. At the end of the story, Jesus asks the legal expert, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The man has to answer, “The

one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus says to him, “Go and do likewise.” Yes, care for the poor, the orphaned, the widow, the needy among your fellow Jews, but do this also for all those you live beside. Break down your false borders and identity markers. All of humanity are my beloved children.

The Hebrew word לְרֵעֶךָ (lere'acha), “your neighbour” is richer than it first appears. It stretches wide, and it reaches deep. At its most intimate, lere'acha means a beloved friend, someone you cherish, perhaps even someone you love with the depth of your soul. A companion of the heart. But it also means something broader: your fellow citizen. The people you live alongside. The ones whose lives unfold beside yours, their joys echoing through your walls, their burdens sometimes brushing up against your own. This is the meaning in the commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house, or spouse, or servant...” (Exodus 20:17). In other words: Do not desire what belongs to the one you share your life with, because your neighbour is not your competitor, but your kin in covenantal living. And then the word stretches even further, to anyone with whom you share a mutual relationship. A stranger who becomes known. A passerby whose path crosses yours. A human being who bears, like you, the image of God. So when Scripture says, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” it’s not setting a boundary. It’s removing one. Your neighbour is your friend. Your neighbour is the person on your street. Your neighbour is the one who differs from you, yet still bears the same divine breath. The call to love our neighbour, then, is not just a rule, it’s a revelation. A widening of the heart. A summons to see all people, near or far, known or unknown, as held in the same generous gaze of God.

Unitarian minister Theodore Parker stated in the 19th century that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” You may be more

familiar with it's use by Martin Luther King Jr. who popularized the quote during the Civil Rights Movement. The arc of God's relationship with his creation is also long and it too bends towards justice, but I would say it is justice in the shape of love, God's steadfast love, *hesed*! We see this arc in the Hebrew Scriptures where God's steadfast love breaks through humanity's desire for vengeance and punishment, in the plea to take care of the needy whoever they may be rather than taking advantage of them. We see it in the New Testament where Jesus models for us this deep compassionate love, where he redeems Peter and Paul and calls them to a life in God's service as we heard about a couple of weeks ago. We see it in the letter to the Colossians as the writer is praying for the Colossians and giving thanks to the Father who has enabled us (Jew **and** Gentile) to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

So what does this all look like, this neighbour-love that Amos calls us to, that Jesus embodies, and that the Spirit empowers? First John tells us that: "God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Now pause with me for a moment and imagine what that kind of love could do. What if, even just within our own homes, our families, our closest friendships, we lived this way? What would shift if perfect love really did drive out fear? If fear of rejection was replaced by a fierce, faithful love? If competition melted into compassion? If the fear of not being good enough was cradled by unconditional welcome? What if we could take off our armour, no longer needing to defend or protect ourselves, and just be loved, just be safe? How would that change the way we gather around a family table at Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or even an ordinary Tuesday night? And then, what

ripple effect might that have? What if we dared to love all our neighbours this way? The ones we agree with and the ones we don't. The ones next door and the ones we've never met. The known and the unknown. Even the ones we've been taught to fear. What would it look like to love those who have wounded us, not by excusing harm, but by choosing a way that refuses to let fear or vengeance define us? Can you imagine the healing that could unfold? Wounds, ours and theirs, beginning to mend? What if God's perfect love, this powerful, tender, barrier-breaking love, began to cast out the fear between neighbours who can't see each other's humanity? Between peoples who have forgotten they are kin?

Friends, this isn't a fantasy. It is a calling. A holy invitation. A revelation of the very heart of God. So let us not just imagine it. Let us live it.

Let us go and do likewise.

Amen.