

**Heroes of the Faith:
“Amos: The Problem of Justice”**

Amos 5:18-24

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His name was Amos. He was known as the troubler from Tekoa. He was a sheep herder and a fig picker that marched up to the capital and confronted the king. At a time of unprecedented prosperity and unlimited power in Israel, Amos came pleading for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. The message of Amos is relevant today. On the way to Holy Communion, I want to pose it in two questions?

WHAT IS LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL?

I suppose most of us consider liberty to be the right to go about my business without interference from others. It's Independence Day – a day to celebrate freedom – the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom of worship, and the freedom of privacy. Such freedoms make us proud to be Americans.

With liberty, is there also a responsibility? I learned something about liberty as a 7th grader, just out of civics class where we had studied the Bill of Rights. In the study hall that followed, I insisted on talking to a friend instead of studying. My teacher asked me to be quiet. I protested on the principle of free speech guaranteed in the Constitution. On the way to the principal's office, I learned the difference between liberty and license.

For years, Ben Stein wrote a column on the “Rich and Famous” that he met at Morton's Steak House. Then a couple of years ago, he quit. Ben Stein came to see that Hollywood stars and sports heroes making eight figure wages and riding around in limousines were not that important. “A real star,” writes Ben in his last column, “is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with an unexploded bomb on the street near where he was guarding a station. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad.” Let us never take our liberty for granted.

Amos says, “*Let justice roll down like waters.*” For nearly five years now, we have been engaged in a worldwide effort to bring terrorists to justice. I believe people need to be accountable for their actions. People ought not to be allowed to get away with murder. If you steal from this church, we are going to take you to court. I hope you pass the word throughout this community. If you drive your car through my house, I expect you to cover damages.

Amos was concerned about another kind of justice, the justice of opportunity. How come wheat prices for the poor are different than wheat prices for the rich? Why is a bushel of grain from the poor weighed on different scales than a bushel of grain for the rich? How dare you rich cows lounge on your ivory furniture while poor people don't even have a shack in which to live?

What would Amos say if he were the guest preacher here today? I can just imagine. Should you be able to borrow money for 6% when the poor have to pay 20%? How dare you shop for bargains, when Jane with four kids and no transportation is limited to the convenient store on the corner? And about housing – well, maybe I just won't go there! What is liberty and justice for all? *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream”* (Amos 5:24). *“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people”* (Proverbs 14:34). The word “righteous” appears over 700 times in the Bible.

WHAT MAKES A NATION RIGHTEOUS?

The people of Israel were religious, but were they righteous? They sang lively songs. They conducted meaningful worship. They had fabulous feasts. Their offerings exceeded expectations. But Amos announces that the Lord is not impressed with any of this.

Have we confused righteousness with right wing politics? I can appreciate the culture wars going on in America. I shutter at those who want to wipe any reference to God off the pages of American history. A nation built on ethical relativity, “you have it your way, I'll have it mine,” is destined to chaos. But have those who most defend the religious rites of America turned issues into idolatry and principles into politics?

We fight over the public display of the Ten Commandments on stone tablets on courthouse lawns. Yet the second Commandment says, *“Do not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything. Do not bow down to them or worship them.”* Can a stone monument on which is written the Ten Commandments become an idol?

We are appalled at the removal of prayer from public schools. Yet, Jesus himself said, *“When you pray go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who is in secret.”*

A man took his son to Washington D.C. so he could see the workings of government. They sat in the Gallery as the House of Representatives came to order and the chaplain led in prayer. When he finished the kid asked, “Why did the minister pray for all these people?” The father answered, “He didn't. He took one look at all these people and prayed for our country.”

What is righteousness? It is right standing with God and others. Wesley talked about Imparted Righteousness – the gracious gift of God which enables a Christian disciple to strive for holiness. To be righteous is to “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Life may not be fair, but we can be fair. We can treat others the way human beings deserve to be treated. This is especially true as we work through the ramifications of immigration. Profiling people because of their ethnic origin is wrong. As we rush to enforce the laws, let us not succumb to a new wave of prejudice.

To be righteous is to love one another, especially our enemies. Wesley challenged his followers to pray for the Holy Spirit to perfect us in love. The real fruit of the Spirit-filled church is not emotion packed services where people speak in tongues, but a community of believers where outsiders are shocked at the depth and sincerity of their service to others. I John 4:18 says, “*There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear.*” Love ends competition, comparison, self-defense, judgment, bigotry and gossip. They will know we are Christians by our love.

To be righteous is to care for the least of these – the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger, the poor, the naked, and the lost. We who are busy doing God’s work need to be prayerful enough to discern what God is working on now. We don’t need God to bless our plans. We need to become a blessing to God’s plans. With half of the world living on less than \$2 a day, and 2 ½ million Africans dying from AIDS, and poverty in this country growing, some might say, it will take an act of God to turn things around. What if God is acting? What if God is on his knees pleading with us, “his hands and feet,” to turn around this tsunami of indifference. Love your neighbor is not a suggestion. It is a commandment.