

The Economics of Worship

sermon digest

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Amos 5:6-8, 10-12, 21-24; 8:4-7

carolyn dipboye

Think of him as a small town boy from down south showing up on the steps of the most going church around. It is a church of the wealthy and powerful. It is where people come to see and be seen. It is the king's favorite shrine. It is a place where people with good sense tread softly and mind their p's and q's. It is a place of nodding assent, making contact, feeling favored and secure. It is the place where you can expect people who matter and, by the way, God to be. It is the place of touching base with all that guarantees your future and gives you a leg up in the competitive marketplace.

Disheveled in appearance, he's a herdsman from across the border. He is from southern Judea, representative of the snobs who have turned their noses up with respect to the religious credentials of their dissociated siblings to the north. And yet, here he is, a most unlikely spokesman ready to hold forth, ready to preach the Word to a most unwilling congregation.

He begins well enough. He begins by taking aim at foreign nations and peoples who have mistreated the home folks through the years. He lists off their atrocious behavior one by one, and everyone is right with him. Each and every one of the enemy nations is judged by God. Yes! A crowd is gathering. They like what they are hearing. He has them in the palm of his hand. Damascus! Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab! Not just their own enemies, but as history has clearly demonstrated, God's enemies as well. (This simple little herder may have an accent, but he speaks the truth!)

And then he turns the tables. Damascus, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and then, Judah and the final blow, Israel. Enemy nations and people as candidates for God's anger and destruction—yes—but Judah and worse, Israel? A commotion begins to stir. How dare he come to this sacred place and utter such nonsense?

The place, perhaps, is Bethel—Beth-El. Its very name represents the essence of holiness. Literally it means “house of God”. The king's favored shrine, it was a bustle of crowds, cattle, and lively conversation. Amos recognized its importance. “Come to Bethel,” he shouts. “Come to Bethel and *transgress*.” Come to Bethel and transgress? Come to Bethel and sin? Imagine, if you will, the billboards that we used to see frequently on our own landscape. “Go to church,” they bid those passing by. Imagine one of them proclaiming “Go to church *and sin*.” It probably wouldn't have lasted long, would it? And yet Amos goes on: “Come to Bethel and transgress; to Gilgal (another shrine)—and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do” (4:4-5).

“Go to church;” “attend the church of your choice;” our advertisements have proclaimed; but never “go to church and sin.” Never “go to church and give your tithes and worship and fellowship and sing and sin in doing so.” And certainly never from the mouth of none other than God, “I hate, I despise your services, and I take no delight in your observance of Advent, Lent or Pentecost. I will not accept your offerings. I will not listen to your music.”

We have largely missed the shocking note in Amos' message. Quickly dismissing the worship of ancient Israel as just too legalistic, as mere empty ritual, we have been able to move on quickly. Be sure to take note, however, that Israel's worship, her festivals, her sacrifices and offerings were each and every one, according to the Torah, commanded by God; and God, not just the people, the Torah and the Psalms tell us repeatedly, took great pleasure in Israel's worship.

Be sure to note, too, that Amos was not a flower child of the 1960's. He was not out to dismantle worship in order to get people to work tending the more pressing needs of hurting people. Like Isaiah and Micah, 8th century prophets who also spoke of God's displeasure with the people's solemn assemblies, Amos is not minimizing worship. He is not railing about the liturgy being out of date or the music being too slow or too fast or worse, the preacher being boring. The problem goes much deeper. His criticism is aimed at two points. Worship must be first and foremost communion with God, or it is pointless. And worship must be connected to and transformative of our individual and corporate lives or it is pure mockery.

Worthy worship is about communion with God. God, Amos insists, had been left out of the picture. Coming on the heels of an unusual stretch of peace when dominate nations had left her alone in their preoccupation with seeking to subdue one another, 8th century Israel had enjoyed a time of unusual growth and prosperity. Her borders had expanded to include more territory than ever before. Amassing great resources from her vassal neighbors, her economy had blossomed. It had also been, however, a time of growing disparity between the rich and the poor. As cities displaced the simple village and the nomadic life of earlier days, more and more people had lost their vital connection to the land. No longer able to make a living through tending their own plots, they were increasingly at the mercy of greedy landlords who stripped them of their crops. When they finally took their crops to market, they were at the mercy, Amos contends, of a rigged system. Victimized by dishonest merchants, the same pious men who surged ahead of them at the sanctuaries

and festivals, they were both underpaid for crops they brought to market and shortchanged in their purchases due to faulty scales and measures. The rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor, who were progressively getting poorer.

And yet, there they were. Prominent at every festival, every sabbath, every sacrifice, they “proclaimed” and “published” their freewill offerings, Amos charges, as if their whole purpose in being there was to make an impression on others. It was, you might say, good for business. And while they are there, their thoughts were elsewhere. They had religiously closed up their shops, but they had not closed up their minds to business. As the prayers and songs and sacrifices proceeded around them, they were impatiently plotting their next move. “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain,” they asked themselves; “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” (8:5-6).

The problem resided in the reality that they sought out Bethel and Gilgal and the other sanctuaries in order to feather their own nests, not in order to meet God. “Do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal,” Amos warns. And then in the well worn words of faithful Israel, “Seek the LORD and live” (5:5-6). First and foremost, worship is about communion with the living God. They should have, as James Limbaugh puts it, been seeking “the Holy One, not the holy place” [*Interpretation Bible Commentary: Hosea-Micah*, 105]. Having lost its focus upon communion with God, worship had lost its very soul.

Worthy worship flows forth into a society of compassion and justice. The story is told of Clarence Jordan, New Testament scholar and founder of Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia. An outspoken advocate for the poor and racial reconciliation, he stood one day in conversation outside an impressive church edifice. The pastor pointed to the steeple on the building, saying proudly, “That cross cost over \$150,000.” Jordan scuffed the toe of his shoe in the dirt for a few moments and then commented thoughtfully. “Time was a fellow could get one of those for nothing.”

The extent to which we encounter the Holy One in our holy places is measured not in the magnificence of our buildings, our liturgies, our choirs or even our preachers. It is measured in the well being of our neighbors. Nothing was more basic to Israel’s theology and nothing is more basic to our own theology than the understanding that we are to be mirrors of the compassion and grace we have encountered in God. “The LORD your God,” the Deuteronomist informed the people, “is God of gods and Lord of lords . . . who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers” (10:17-19).

For Amos, the most telling evidence that Israel had strayed far from the God who had brought her out of Egypt was her mistreatment of the poor. It is the indictment with which the book of Amos opens and to which it returns midway through and at the end. Selling the poor into debt slavery for the trifling cost of a pair of sandals, cheating them with faulty scales and measures, “grinding” them, and “crushing” them to the ground was unconscionable for a people that pretended to worship God in their sanctuaries. It went directly against their covenant with God and one another.

True worship of God is not just about one day of the week or the keeping of the religious festivals. It is about sabbath rest and worship spilling over into all of the days of the week. It is about the sense of awe, gratitude and calling that one experiences at Passover and Pentecost, Advent and Lent spilling over into acts of compassion and an unwavering commitment to justice. Authentic worship is not just about what we do on Sunday. It is also about what we do on Monday. Justice, birthed in the heart and purposes of God, is something that we flesh out in our everyday relationships. It is about the kind of lives we live individually *and* the sort of society we seek to fashion around us.

The economics of worship is just this: care of the widow, the orphan, the abused, the unemployed, the homeless, the immigrant laborer. It is, as Craig Satterlee suggests, about my sense of compassion for the homeless man I pass on the street on my way to get a cup of cappuccino, but it is also about the coffee grower, who like the peasant laborer in Amos’ day, is squeezed out of a livable income by the policies of companies and international trade. It is about small random acts of kindness as I go about my business everyday, but it is also about the kind of policies I as a citizen seek to put in place in my community and nation.

“When the prophets speak of justice,” James Lindburg insists, they do not enter into the realm of the theoretical or speak of philosophical or legal notions. . . . Rather, they lead us through those quarters of the city where the poor live and they invite us to look into the eyes of the lonely widow, the hurting orphan, and the hungry beggar. Or they take us through the countryside and introduce us to a young couple about to lose the family farm.”

One hundred and eighty years ago, Quaker, poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier, looking upon the suffering around him, published a brochure on slavery in the United States. On the front was a picture of a

black man in chains and the words, "Am I not a man and a brother?" Fifteen years later he penned the hymn "O Brother Man, Fold to Thy Heart Thy Brother" with the words

Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.
So may we worship and see and work.