

On the Side of Justice

sermon digest

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Amos 5:1, 8-15, 21-24

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Early October is a succession of special days and weeks calling our attention to special needs around us and around the world. We have just completed National Awareness of Mental Illness Week, reminding us that 1 in 4 adults experience a mental health disorder in a given year and 1 in 10 children live with a serious mental or emotional disorder. Fewer than a third of the adults and half of the children, however, receive mental health services; and half of those age 14 and older drop out of high school—the highest dropout rate of any disability group in our country [Mental Illness: Facts and Numbers,” National Alliance on Mental Illness].

This past Thursday marked the first International Year of the Girl, focused on extending education and opportunity to girls discriminated against simply because they are girls. It was a week informed by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s remarkable book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, and evidence mounting around the world concerning not just the victimization of women and girls but their resilience and resourcefulness if given half a chance. “Women,” Kristof and WuDunn insist, “aren’t the problem but the solution.” Increasingly world aid organizations are finding women and girls not to be simply the recipients of help, but invaluable allies in ensuring that aid accomplishes and even surpasses its intended purpose. And this despite a determined effort appropriately labeled *gendercide*, manifest in such cruel and deadly practices as honor killing, wife burning, kidnaping and sex trafficking, mass rape, genital mutilation, child marriage, denial of medical care, and maternal mortality, which needlessly claims a woman in child birth every minute. Worldwide estimates put the number of women who are simply “missing,” simply disappeared at between 60 million and 101 million; and every year, at least another 2 million girls disappear. The tragic story of Malala, the 14-year-old Pakistani girl shot by the Taliban last week because of her insistence on getting an education, speaks to the brutal forces that are out there—yes; but it also speaks volumes to the courage and determination of women and girls who are not content to remain in their situation. The fact that the people in Pakistan have risen up in opposition, despite the danger to their own lives, and the fact that the country’s clerics have issued a fatwa condemning the violence as contrary to Islam are signs of hope. For more signs of hope, signs that efforts ranging from small to heroic make a huge difference, I encourage you to check www.halftthesky.org. For hope, not just compassion, not just caring, but giving ourselves to making a difference is endemic to faith.

Add to this, the first Monday of October, designated by the United Nations as World Habitat Day, an occasion we celebrated in last Sunday’s choir festival on social justice, honoring Habitat for Humanity of Anderson County’s 25th anniversary, and October 16, marking World Food Day. Today, congregations of all kinds are gathering across the country in recognition that during the recession, which made so many of us nervous about our savings, the number of people at risk of hunger in the United States rose by more than a third—from 36.2 million in 2007 to 48.8 million last year, with food banks seeing a 46 percent increase in clients seeking assistance. Some 990 million suffer from chronic hunger worldwide; and in the Horn of Africa, 13 million are on the brink of starvation, due to the region’s worst drought in 60 years. More than an occasion for protecting our sensitivities by ignoring the enormity of the problem, however; it is the occasion for doubling down and prioritizing those efforts, those programs that make a difference. Our valued partner, Bread for the World, and numerous other aid and public policy organizations are calling upon our citizenry to form a Circle of Protection around the neediest in our world to assure that desperately needed help is not eliminated or cut but protected and extended. Last year 46.5 million people received emergency food aid through the U.S. Food for Peace program, and 5 million children and families received food through our international Food for Education and child nutrition programs. At home, our National School Lunch Program provides critical low-cost and free lunches to children each school day. Established under President Harry Truman in 1946, the program, if you remember, was not only an act of kindness, but also an act of self-interest, driven by the realization that so many of the young men examined for the draft in World War II were suffering from malnutrition. Add to this, the addition of the school breakfast program and the summer meals program and more recently, the extension of the meals program to include evening meals now provided in our community with the help of East Tennessee Family Services and the Boys’ Club, not to mention the backpack program operated through the Oak Ridge Schools Family Resource Center.

Lest we become overwhelmed by the level of need or become cynical that our shared efforts make any difference at all, lives are being saved, and lives are being invested with hope. Although our own Table of Grace and our support of local ministries in our community may seem small compared to the need, the level of gratitude we have encountered, the expression of appreciation for the dignity we have sought to honor in our dinner guests say otherwise. The cup of cold water we offer in Jesus' name speaks not just of who we are, but who the God is that we serve. Acts of mercy and justice expended within our church walls and through our stewardship as citizens seeking to influence the priority our government places upon meeting human need are an expression of faithfulness to the God of mercy and grace we have encountered not once, not twice, but consistently in Hebrew and Christian scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ.

God is on the side of justice; and if we would be where God is, we must be there as well. Enter Amos, prophet of God to the Hebrew people in the mid-eighth century B.C.E. A herdsman from the town of Tekoa south of Jerusalem, he was awakened from a life of tranquility and peace by the experience of God's voice roaring like an angry lion, ready to devour its prey. The prey, interestingly enough, was the nation Israel, itself lulled into peaceful slumber and good vibes during a time of unparalleled economic growth and geographic expansion. Excavations of Bethel, the royal sanctuary north of Jerusalem where Amos went to deliver his message, still give evidence of the luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle against which Amos railed—a lifestyle that set the extravagant lifestyles of the rich and greedy over that of the masses. The multiple and luxuriant homes of the few contrasted sharply with the bare, subsistence lifestyle of the masses. “Beds of ivory,” comfortably cushioning the lives of the self-indulgent rich, spoke volumes when compared to the bare floors or thin, woven mats upon which the masses rested. Wealthy women, defamed by Amos as the “cows of Bashan” who “oppress the poor and needy,” fattened themselves on plentiful and luxuriant foods and prime, costly meat, contrasted with the many who had no meat at all. Bowls of wine lapped up by the rich at their opulent feasts and vials of costly oils and perfumes slathered upon the bodies of those who could afford them, spoke volumes about a lack of care for the wider populace for whom such self-indulgence was out of the question.

Living directly contrary to the covenant God had long ago drawn up with those who would identify themselves as a people of God, the rich and powerful lived in disregard for their neighbors. “You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (a bitter plant often used metaphorically to speak of poison, disaster or devastation). Therefore, Amos charges,

Because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate (5:11-12).

The problem was not that they had not sought God. Their sanctuaries and their offerings of sacrifice were every bit as extravagant as their lifestyles. They had sought God, or at least they had assured themselves that God was on their side; but they had not sought the good of God's people. They had abandoned the practice of “justice in the gate.” Contradictory to God's instruction that they should care for the widow, the orphan, the poor and alien in their midst, the gate of the city, the court, if you will, where justice was administered, had become the place where the vulnerable among them could no longer get a hearing.

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.

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:21-24).

God, Amos is saying, is not for sale to the highest bidder. If we want God's imprimatur on our lives, we must turn our attention not to somehow luring God to our side of the street, but to discerning who God is and where God is and joining God there. If you want to be where God is, Amos is saying, it is there among those who are vulnerable. If you want to be where God is, reach out to them and consistently, steadfastly put yourself on the side of working for justice for them

Speaking in terms of the life he knew best, the life of a herdsman, Amos envisions justice rolling down "like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Living in a land that was water-challenged, to say the least, Amos knew the day in and day out task of searching for water for his herd. He knew the land to be riddled with deep ravines, ravines that would often become wadis or conduits during heavy rainfall, only to become bone dry a few hours or a few days later. Amos knew, then, the value, the blessing of "an ever-flowing stream;" and this, he said, is the mark of faithfulness: justice that flows as naturally as water flows and righteousness made evident in the consistent extension of justice to those in need.

So, do you want to be on God's side? If you do, plant yourself just here, alongside and in the midst of God's little ones. Feed the hungry. Seek relief for those who are oppressed. Reach out a helping hand and give those who are disadvantaged a hand up. And be consistent. In season and out of season. When it's the fashionable thing to do and when it's not. If we want to be in the presence of God, it is just here. God is on the side of loving, gracious, compassionate justice that helps those in need claim a future of hope. Let's join God, just there.