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"Love in Society is Named Justice"

[Amos 5:22-25; 6:4-7; 7:7-17](#)

Good morning everyone! Thank you for being my community. Thank you for being the people who regularly remind me that there is no love of God apart from love of neighbor.

Today I would like to share with you a few of my recent thoughts on the connections between the prophet Amos and our inherited privileges and responsibilities. This summer season at CMCL we are using lectionary texts as the basis for sermon material. When I saw that this week's readings include Amos chapter 7, I was reminded that when this community was surveyed a few years ago and asked to choose their favorite scripture text, Micah 6 verse 8 was a top pick. "He has told you oh mortal what is good; what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Like Micah, Amos preaches that it is only possible for a community to be in right relationship with the Creator if that community practices love-in-action for its most vulnerable members. For Amos, and other prophets like him, prayers, sacrifices, and songs of praise are counterfeit worship when they are performed by people who have learned to tune out the cries of the poor around them.

Archaeological evidence indicates a shift in the structure of the economy of Israel just before the lifetime of Amos and other early Hebrew Prophets. Traditional farming in the Hill Country of the ten northern tribes (called "Israel," while the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin were called "Judah") had previously included a wide variety of crops, some for trade outside of the community, and some to feed the local community. These farms were handed down from generation to generation and were owned by the families who lived on them. Nothing in the Book of Amos is critical of people living a comfortable life as a result of hard work. Nor is Amos critical of folk festivals, harvest celebrations, the sacrifice of one's own goods in thanksgiving to God, or of beautiful music that celebrates relationship with neighbor and relationship with God.

Instead, Amos believes that the Creator is furious at what we today would call the one-percenters. Those absentee landlords who had recently restructured the economy of Israel in such a way that their patterns of overconsumption, what is sometimes called "a high standard of living," were funded by the sacrifice of the lives and health of the newly poor family farmers in the hills. Historians have shown [Endnote 1] that by Amos's day, the warlords and merchants of the fortress cities in the valleys had begun to use predatory loans and other legal but immoral tactics to turn farmers from small land holders into sharecroppers doomed to intergenerational poverty.

This is the economic injustice that Amos is describing in versus like 2:6 "they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and 2:7, they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; 2:8, they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed." Amos is not a stereotypical Puritan who gets angry when other people are having more fun than he is. These verses are not a critique of small-town celebrations or traditional holidays. They are instead an indictment of any lifestyle that is funded by what we might call "legal crime." The elite classes in cities like Samaria or Bethel were not working for a living. They were making a killing and calling it a living. The clothes they wore and the wine they drank were the direct result of their financial instruments and economic policy.

In the verses we read this morning in chapter 5, Amos, like Micah, contrasts social justice, where everyone has enough to eat and a way to earn a living, with elaborate sacrificial temple systems that displace practical love of neighbor and replace it with lavish praise of God. In fact, in verse 25, we see that Amos is one of several prophets who challenge the legacy of the book of Leviticus and assert that God did not ordain animal sacrifice after Israel's exodus from Egypt. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 is another such passage).

In chapter 6, not even the esthetic genius of David is considered honorable or effective in praising God if it is part of a financially predatory lifestyle. Art does not trump ethics, for Amos.

Archaeological evidence of ancient shipping receipts on shards of pottery [Robert Coote, p 36] shows that the lifestyles that Amos is denouncing here were made possible after the small hill farms had been forced to stop growing the diversity of crops that had fed their children for centuries and were required by their financial creditors to change over to high value exportable crops, most notably olive oil and grape wine. The landlords then demanded such a large share of these products from the sharecroppers who were barely surviving debt slavery, that they were able to bathe in the oil and drink so much wine, from bowls, instead of from cups, that they could regularly afford the kind of party where the main goal of the host and guests is to pass out drunk by the end of the night [Robert Coote, p 38].

Amos's faith in God's love for the victims of the "growth economy" of his day prompts him to preach that any movement God makes to rescue them will result in death and disaster for the culturally elite predator classes. In Chapter 7, he sees a vision in which even the sanctuaries dedicated to the worship of God would be destroyed because they had become a part of an economy of deadly luxury.

His opponents also believe in God. They believe in the love of God. They believe that they experience that love on a daily basis, in their comfortable lifestyle, and on an annual basis, as they observe their growing financial leverage. For Amos's opponents, for the priests and chaplains, God is the **sponsor** of the globalizing economy, not its enemy. So, in their ears, the words of Amos can only be understood as blasphemy against God's chosen and blessed ruling class, and as treason against the king. For me, the crux of today's passage from chapter 7 is in verse 13, where Amaziah warns Amos to "never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Amaziah is as religious as Amos is. But, in contrast to Amos, he is a conscientious conservative. His conscience, his sense of right and wrong, is aligned with what he believes is good for the culturally and economically dominant class. Thus, Amaziah is genuinely, honestly, appalled that Amos sees things upside down. Amos sees God as the champion of the victims of what predator classes call "our way of life." Amaziah sees God as the author and defender of that same nationalistic "way of life." So . . . the reader of Amos is invited to ponder . . . What really pollutes a sanctuary? . . . Beautiful music and full offering baskets that are the products of social injustice? . . . Or Amos's impertinent, unauthorized, uneducated tirades against the nation?

In the next verse Amos makes it clear that he is not a professional prophet. He does not make a living from producing God talk that justifies injustice. He simply has to call it like he sees it. And the only future he can see for the god-and-country elites of his day is a desolate future, characterized by violation and murder.

The title of the sermon today is a fraction of a sentence from page 71 of James Cone's important book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* [Endnote 2]. It is a line that I have written out and posted in my study where I can see it frequently. It reminds me that structural injustice cannot be adequately addressed or repaired by one-on-one interpersonal reconciliation or friendship.

Amos would not have been satisfied if a few of the privileged people of his day had become pen pals with sharecroppers in the hills, regularly sending them a bit of cash as a way of calming their own consciences. And judging from how deep-rooted he thinks the injustices are, Amos would not have been impressed with short-term hit-and-run mission trips into the mountains to share morsels of luxury with the so-called lower classes.

Love between perpetrators of everyday, structural, legalized, injustice and the victims of that everyday injustice is not a solution unless it starts to disassemble the machinery of harm and rebuild communities around policies that repair and empower.

Where does that leave us today? The United States has a long history of violently "adjusting" agricultural economies, on more than one continent, away from diverse small-scale sustainable farming and into export crops that make small farmers vulnerable to the markets manipulated by the rich. The immigrants risking their lives to run north to the United States are running from Countries destabilized and devastated by exactly the kind of economic injustice that Amos preached against. Similarly, the United States has a long history of affirmative action for whites [Endnote 3] and predatory lending for blacks [Endnote 4]. An untold number of small farms in this country were owned and successfully farmed by blacks for decades until a combination of mob violence and financial leverage was used to displace those families.

Making friends across racial and national and economic lines is important and indispensable. But it is not enough, because it is not lasting change. Real love, if it is allowed to impact society, is allowed to restructure economic relationships from a pattern of harm to a pattern of community. The term we use for love in community is "justice."

In his book, James Cone contrasts Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he considers to be one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, and from whom he personally learned a great deal, with Martin Luther King Junior. Niebuhr was openly critical of how blacks were treated in his lifetime but continued to counsel patience and recommend only slow reforms that would not infuriate southern white churchgoers. It was Niebuhr who said, "All prophecy begins with Amos." But it was Martin Luther King who risked his life to live out what he preached. When Martin preached the lines we sing later in today's service in Voices Together number 791, Amos 5 verse 24, "but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," he went on to risk his life by calling for disruptive, thorough, life-saving, adjustments to the

American economy. He was not assassinated for asking people to remember to tithe or to make friends with folks who look different from themselves. It was only when he made prophetic denunciations, "jeremiads," that struck at the very heart of the United States economic system, that he became such a threat to what the ruling classes call "our way of life," that his life was taken.

Where does this leave us today, especially those of us who are called white, and therefore benefit the most from the way the United States works on a normal day?

I don't know about you, but I can say that I am often emotionally paralyzed by how immense and seemingly unchangeable the injustices are. I have just finished reading Herald Press's book by Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer titled *Been in the Struggle: Pursuing an Anti-racist Spirituality*. It is an honest look at where the Mennonite church is today with regard to racial injustice, and, because it is honest, it has no easy solutions or quick fixes. I would like to share with you a few lines from the book:

"It's tempting to scoff at or shame people who reject the truth about the history of this country's racism. Shame is a poor motivator of change, and our teaching and organizing cannot be shame-based. We cannot build strong coalitions by shaming people. However, we can make a distinction between shaming people and uncovering the truth and dealing with what has happened in the past. The reactions to teaching critical race theory in this country rely on making people think that acknowledging the violent racist past of the United States is meant to invoke shame. That is not the sole purpose. Yes, we should feel shame but that shame should motivate us to dig up all the vestiges of that past and not repeat the same mistakes." [p 217]

The authors point out that paranoid reactions to the 1619 project, for example, often assert that Americans "should never feel shame, only pride, in our country and we should not even mention, let alone dwell on, the parts where we didn't get it right." [p 218]

Shame can be a shortcut for actual repentance, a counterfeit for real participation in structural change.

Another way in which privileged people allow themselves to stop short of actual prophetic action that would make a difference is by substituting one-on-one relationship for the kind of love that is called Justice. The authors of this book say "We don't knock friendship or relationship building as a path toward an anti-racist future. But we also know that by itself this has not worked, because those friendships and relationships often fall apart when the unequal power imbalance comes into play. Trust immediately breaks down when white supremacy is chosen over justice and equality. It happens in myriad ways in the workplace, in neighborhoods and schools, and at church." [p 218]

Regina, one of the authors, is a Mennonite college professor with African American heritage. She says: "I don't need white people to befriend me so that they can become pleasantly astonished at how human I am and then not mind being around me, living near me, being supervised or taught by me when the world has conditioned them to suspect me, fear me, assume I have no intellect and that I will bring your property values down, lower your workplace standards, and so on. While all of these outcomes are lovely (and even desirable if we are going to be friends), they are not what I need. What I need from white people is to assume that I am human and because of that to want to work on behalf of my humanity just as you work on behalf of yours. We need coalitions." [p 215]

As Mennonites, we have a choice about which portions of our heritage to repent of and which to reactivate. Early Anabaptism was prophetic. Anabaptists were not cute targets of tourists fascinated by the "simple life." They were considered an immediate threat to the capitalist order of Christian Europe and were loudly critical of the counterfeit pieties and ornate sanctuaries of their day. They were considered by conscientious conservatives to be a communist threat in the cultural wars of their day [Endnote 5]. Anabaptism would not have occurred when it did, in the way it did, if the Peasant's War had not occurred first. [Endnote 6]

But by the time I was born into the Mennonite world, it was no longer a movement. It was a holding pattern. Mennonites had become very "whitened" and learned to benefit from predatory capitalism. But many Mennonites have a subcultural memory of 16th Century Anabaptist counterculture. And that memory sometimes includes an awareness that esthetic arts are often a dominant culture's substitute for, or displacement of, ethics. Some Mennonites in my growing up years preached Amos 6:5, about David's musical improv, in a way that gave the impression that self-deprivation in terms of esthetics is, in itself, an ethical accomplishment. To my mind, this seems yet another detour around the actual message of Amos. A chance to be conscientious without being "radical," a chance to "be odd for God," without really examining "the roots" of the problem. [Endnote 7]

So, again, thank-you for being my community. Thank you for making the kind of music that makes the pain of the poor audible to me rather than the kind of music that numbs me to my own reality and to that of others. Thank you for being my community. Thank you for producing art, in the CMCL Parrot Gallery, downstairs, in the sanctuary, and elsewhere, that encourages my children to notice beauty wherever it occurs and to honor the resilience of the human spirit in the face of human injustice and pain.

Thank you for being my community. Thank you for sustaining my hope that a better world is possible, and that God loves us enough to save us . . . even from ourselves.

Endnotes:

1. The socio-economic background sketch used here is drawn from Robert B. Coote, *Amos Among The Prophets: Composition and Theology*, Fortress Press, 1981.
2. published by Orbis Books, 2011.
3. Ira Katznelson's *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*, by W W Norton, 2005, demonstrates that while the New Deal, Social Security, and the GI Bill provided significant assistance to some African Americans, their net effect was to rapidly expand the wealth and opportunity gap between whites and blacks in the U.S.
4. The November 15/22, 2021 issue of *The Nation* has a feature article that expands Katznelson's analysis with regard to small farm ownership and prejudicial loans: "Forced Off Their Land: A decades-long history of discrimination at the USDA has destroyed the livelihood of thousands of Black farmers."
5. See chapter 7 of Leonard Verduin's 1964 book *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, titled "Kommunisten!"
6. *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, 1991, is a book length documentation of author James Stayer's assertion that many of the early spokespersons of German Anabaptism were veterans of the Peasants' War of 1525.
7. During the service in which this sermon was presented, the author William Stringfellow was mentioned as one of CMCL member Margaret Krumm's favorite authors. This reminded me of the one of his titles that I consider most pertinent to my situation: *My People Is The Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic*, Doubleday, 1964. William was a white New York attorney who chose to live in Harlem and leveraged his educational advantage and inherited class privilege on behalf of his disadvantaged neighbors with years of *pro bono* courtroom work. When Karl Barth visited the U.S., he is reported to have said that if there is one person that North American Christians should listen to, it is Stringfellow.