

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 14, 2018

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Amos 5:6,7,10-15 Seek the Lord and live,
or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire;
it will devour them,
and Bethel will have no one to quench it.
7 There are those who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground.
10 There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court
and detest the one who tells the truth.
11 You levy a straw tax on the poor
and impose a tax on their grain.
Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.
12 For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.
There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes
and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
13 Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.
14 Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.
Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.
15 Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.
Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.

“Seek Justice from God’s Own Heart”

Sunday School is a great tool for spiritual development. We get to have a basic framework of the main events and most important events in all of human history. We get to focus on the big picture and the blockbuster episodes highlighting God’s action among humanity. But there are certain things that quite appropriately don’t fit into most Sunday School lessons. There are quite a few surprises in the Bible that would probably earn an R rating depending on which movie director was in charge of putting it on the screen. Some are quite shocking and scandalous. Others just address complex issues that go beyond the basics of what most Sunday School teachers of kindergarteners would comfortably try to explain.

Justice is a big issue in our society. Today we hear plenty of accusations about corruption and injustice, labeling opponents as deceptive and shady, hinting at illegal or sketchy practices the other side engages in. And those are just the political campaign commercials. We are so used to hearing about accusations and implications of oppression by the powerful and depriving the rights of the weak. We hardly bat an eye when a respected business or community leader is discovered for trying to game the system for his own advantage. When employers and landlords treat people unfairly, we just shrug our shoulders, assuming that's just the way the world is.

So you may be surprised to learn that issues of justice are very big and very bright on God's radar screen of issues. In fact, the Prophet Amos has earned the nickname of "Shepherd of Social Justice" by many Bible commentators. His book of prophecy isn't huge, but the main recurring theme running through all 9 chapters is the mistreatment of God's people by those who are supposed to be living God's standards of morality and ethics. So when we turn to God's Word in Amos chapter 5 we get something better than the script for a new attack ad or dismissing unfair treatment in our community. Amos tells us: **"Seek the LORD and live."** (Amos 5:6) The key to finding justice is turning to the Lord. From his own heart we find the life God wants for us.

A quick study of Israel's history tells us they were always in a bit of a touchy situation. Israel was this tiny country surrounded by bigger, more powerful countries. Almost as if New Mexico stood on its own while the eastern half of the U.S. was one country and the western half was another country. Then Israel split in two, just a tiny county really surrounded by intimidating nations. But at this point, in the middle of the 700s B.C., things were actually going pretty well in Israel. The political power and economic success were at their peak. There were fewer worries about enemy armies. Most people were consumed by wondering where their next meal was coming from. But as optimistic as things looked on statistical reports and economic spreadsheets, the nation was rotting from the inside. Amos paints a picture where injustices are being committed against the poor. The less powerful had no resources, no ability to defend themselves. Worse yet, the justice system was failing to provide any kind of relief. In fact, good people were so intimidated, they just kept silent. People with a conscience didn't dare speak up and risk their own personal harm.

Yet I want you to notice how God addresses these huge societal issues. Zoom in on the way God deals with issues not just in Israel 2,700 years ago, but in a way that gets to the heart of justice in every age and every culture. God isn't afraid of getting right to the heart of the issues: **"For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins."** (Amos 5:12) God encourages a better relationship with Him as the key to dealing with this: **"Seek the Lord and live."** (Amos 5:6) Then He warns about what the failure to heed his words will mean: **"or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it."** (Amos 5:6) The root problem to all of these societal issues as God sees it, is a wandering away from God. Human hearts get disconnected from their Creator. We get out of sync with the One who lovingly leads and guides us. We've turned away from God's own heart.

No wonder God doesn't try to deal with these issues by passing laws and trying to intimidate offenders, by blasting abusers on social media or blacklisting perpetrators from advancing in their careers. We can pass laws. We can initiate reforms. But we won't see justice as long as we are apart from God's own heart.

When we think of injustice, we usually tend to think on the big, global scale. We have in our minds the 1% who are ripping off the rest of us. It's the investment bankers who are kicking people out of their homes and the hedge fund managers who are buying up businesses by the dozens and streamlining costs by kicking 30% of the workforce to the curb. According to statistics provided by victimsofcrime.org the most common complaints filed for internet injustice were people trying to sell a vehicle they didn't own. Then it was real estate they didn't own. And next was scams of the romantic variety. The Bureau of Justice provides all kinds of statistics about crime. One of the more enlightening numbers they report is that in a ten year span, more violent crimes were perpetrated by strangers than non-strangers in only 2 years.¹

Maybe that shouldn't be so shocking. Amos tells us: **“There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.”** (Amos 5:7) This word for “bitterness” in the Bible is helpful. It tells us about a naturally occurring impulse to treat people as obstacles to getting what we want out of life. Sometimes we don't even see other people because we are so wrapped up in the pursuit of our own goals. One author describes it this way: “We all face this battle between selfishness and love, between our desire for a comfortable life and our concern for poor and hurting people around us.”²

Maybe you're not a slumlord. But it's still easy to see people with less power standing in your path to improved success. There are plenty of times when your behavior might not technically be illegal, but are you thinking of ways to improve and protect your neighbor's property and means of livelihood? So often you feel powerless against the forces of immorality in our world. You don't think your voice will make a difference, so you don't even try. After all, you could face ruin if you make too much noise about injustice around you.

What we see in ourselves just shows us seeking only good without God won't ever be enough. Seeking God is a common phrase in the Bible. But seeking God isn't just like having another stop on a list of errands. After you run to the grocery store and fill up your truck with gas, you don't just go in the general direction of God so you can check one more item off your list. Seeking God means a wholehearted dedication to God.

I had a basic outline for today's message and most of my notes written by Wednesday this week. Then, when Hurricane Michael hit and I knew my parents were inside the parsonage in Panama City, I have to admit to you that it was really hard for me to concentrate on anything. That was until I got a phone call from my mom, almost 24 hours after I had gotten

¹ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cvus/previous/cvus37.pdf>

² Roger Palms, “The Pleasure of His Company.”

the last text from her. And as I was glued to the news about that Hurricane, I couldn't help but be in awe over the devastation I was seeing in the news. Some of those cities looked like they were almost wiped off the map. People involved in rescue efforts described it as a war zone.

I think this is a powerful image for us to use for God's judgment. In Amos chapter 5 God is encouraging his people to make a serious change the same way the authorities were encouraging evacuations for many communities in the Florida Panhandle. That begging and pleading is followed by warnings of what is going to happen if people fail to listen. God knows exactly what is going on in the hearts of his people. He doesn't accept it when we go through the motions. He rejects all the excuses we use to tell ourselves we're not as bad as so many other people. He demands unflinching, uncompromising obedience. He makes a promise and follows up with a warning: **"Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it."** He describes his judgment in very devastating in the verse right before this: **"Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, for... Bethel will be reduced to nothing."** (Amos 5:4,5)

All our best efforts to seek God show us what we are still missing. Just think of the rich young man who came to Jesus genuinely seeking after God's own heart. He had prepared a pretty lengthy list of everything he had done for God, all the commandments he had obeyed, all the boxes he had checked off in life. There's something in this account that really stands out: **"Jesus looked at him and loved him."** (Mark 10:21) Jesus loved him enough to point out the gaping wide hole in his heart. The good things he had sought to do for God weren't ever going to be enough. God needs seeking to be wholehearted dedication, flawless without any hint of selfishness. That was the one weakness, the heart issue the rich young man was not willing to address.

To have true justice, we need the one who seeks us. Jesus seeks the unjust and oppressors, the abusers and the self-serving. Jesus seeks out the rich young man and the one who stands silently by while injustice runs rampant. Jesus seeks out those with bitterness in our hearts and our desires for a better life that turn blind eyes to the less fortunate and oppressed in our society.

Jesus is the one who sought you out by giving up his rights and privileges and prerogatives as God when he came down to this earth. Jesus is the one who shows the true heart of God by enduring the injustice of sham religious council and the oppression cowardly Roman rulers. Jesus was hated for his scolding of self-righteous religious officials and Jesus was detested because he was truly innocent. Jesus spoke up for the disadvantaged and marginalized in society, yet remained silent when it came to his own defense. Jesus is the one who was truly, 100% just, yet drank down the bitterness of your selfishness and my self-seeking and the world's inhumanity to man. Jesus was deprived of justice so you could be guiltless in God's eyes. The crucifixion of Jesus shows us the true heart of God. By his resurrection God makes you to be wholly and completely his without any flaw or imperfection. Amos tells us: **"Seek good, not evil, that you may live."** (Amos 5:14) Seeking Jesus we obtain the righteousness he earned and the life only he can give.

The life Jesus offers is something you could never get by your own efforts or striving. Jesus promises: **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** (John 10:10) Jesus gives the life of complete peace and harmony you could never get by taking advantage of another person. Jesus gives the life of meaning and fulfillment you could never have by your definition of earthly comfort. Again Jesus promises: **“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.”** (John 10:28) Life with Jesus frees us from the need to abuse and use other people.

Beyond this election cycle, it’s a pretty safe bet our society will still have some problems. Business leaders and average citizens will misbehave in spectacular fashion. And still God invites you to seek Him. Seek his heart of mercy for the best solution to our problems of injustice. Seeking the Lord and celebrating his righteousness freely given in Jesus frees you to serve the Lord and look out for the needs of others. In the security and freedom won for you by Jesus you can stand up for the rights of others. Better than seeking solutions in courts or corporations or personal struggles, Amos invites us to seek the Lord. Seek and celebrate justice from Gods own heart. Amen.