

“Afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted”

Sermon for Oct. 10 2021

Readings:

Old Testament: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

6 Seek the Lord and live,

lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,

7 O you who turn justice to wormwood

and cast down righteousness to the earth!

10 They hate him who reproves in the gate,

and they abhor him who speaks the truth.

11 Therefore because you trample on[a] the poor

and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

12 For I know how many are your transgressions

and how great are your sins—

you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

13 Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time,

for it is an evil time.

14 Seek good, and not evil,

that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.

15 Hate evil, and love good,

and establish justice in the gate;

it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,

will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Gospel: Mark 10:17-22

17 And as [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” 20 And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” 21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all

that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

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The prophet Amos was a shepherd and farmer in the southern kingdom of Judah, and he lived up near the border with Israel. Remember it is a divided kingdom at this point, with Israel building their own temple in Bethel. Jeroboam II was king at the time and, if you look at his record from a secular perspective, you might conclude that he was pretty successful. He fought several battles, won a lot of territory for Israel and that meant significant wealth for the nation. It was an economic powerhouse for a time.

But Amos couldn't care less about that. He was angry and fed up with how morally corrupt the nation had become under Jeroboam. The king promoted inclusivity among the people, including in the temple where not only were foreign idols permitted, but he demanded they be placed in the worship space.

No one stood up to this, or any of the other corruption in the nation. Israel then is not so different from America today, in that the idea that they were one people under God was something of a mockery. They were, indeed, deeply divided just as we are. And just as corrupt morally, in not more in that it was still OK to buy and sell human individuals into slavery... Debt slavery, as the gap between the have and the have not's, the rich and the poor, the powerful and influential and the powerless and the deplorables was as significant then as now.

Amos has a word from God for such a time...

*⁷O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth! . . .
You, who hate him who reproveth in the gate, and abhor those who speak the truth.
Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell 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 turn aside the needy in the gate.
Small wonder that he who is prudent keeps silent in such a time, for it is an evil time.*

When Amos tells them...

*⁶Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour,
with none to quench it for Bethel,*

What he means is that God has had it with the Northern Kingdom. He calls them "Joseph" because "Ephraim," Joseph's son, was the largest tribe in the North. I think God uses that title in order to emphasize the close relation to Judah in the south as ALL of us are ONE people who follow the LORD. The Lord our God is Yahweh, we are HIS Children... And if THAT GOD, the God of our fathers, breaks out like fire in Bethel... God's House... well, don't be looking to your idolatrous gods in the temple to quench it.

¹⁴Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. ¹⁵Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

So far the text...

"EXHIBIT the fruits of faith or suffer the consequences... Produce or die... Repent O Israel... and return to the Lord." That's pretty much the summary of the lesson. So what does THAT have to do with the Gospel lesson today?

"Good Teacher, **what must I -DO-** to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17)

Jesus responds...

¹⁹You know the commandments:

(Notice that he begins with the Second Table of the Law...)

'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'

²⁰And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

²¹And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him,

Welllllll.... "You lack **one thing**: go,

(Risk everything... and follow me.) and of course, you will have treasure in heaven;

The rich young man is disheartened, GLOOMY, downcast by the saying. He went away distressed, sorrowful, vexed, discomfited even, for he had great possessions.

The well-known saying about it being [easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle](#) follows...

WELL.... what's the connection then? We see a very comfortable person, seeking assurance of their comfort... and Jesus telling him things that really make him VERY UNcomfortable.

And maybe that's what Amos was doing, too... Making God's people VERY UNCOMFORTABLE with the way they were living their lives.

So... is that what I should do here in the sermon? Afflict the comfortable?

I put it that way because there is a saying among Lutheran pastors that our job is to "Afflict the Comfortable and Comfort the Afflicted." That's how a LAW and Gospel sermon works.

The application of the LAW is supposed to afflict the comfortable

And the Gospel is intended to bring comfort to the afflicted.

So which is it that *you* need today? Because a big mistake would be if I somehow managed to comfort the comfortable and afflict the afflicted. Imagine, a PASTOR somehow telling a comfortable sinner they don't have to do anything, but simply be comfortable in their SINS... While at the same time, telling a brokenhearted repentant sinner they haven't done enough to enjoy the comforts of the Gospel, they STILL NEED to do MORE.

"Hey you with the broken arms and legs... you need to go to the hospital. Hurry up and get there, before you die."

"Oh, and you... I see you've been drinking poison again. Well, it's OK, it probably won't kill you right away. You've got plenty of time. And if you haven't gotten sick by now, you're probably immune anyway. You never know."

I know that's ridiculous. No pastor or anyone would say something like that.

It's just that we have both the comfortable and the broken hearted sitting in our congregations. Amos' message was to the idol worshipping and self-satisfied among God's people in the north...

EXHIBIT the fruits of faith or suffer the consequences... Produce or die...

Repent, O Israel and return to the Lord. They needed TO HEAR THE LAW AND BE MADE UNCOMFORTABLE.

The young man in our text wanted also to hear the law... thinking that the law would comfort him... to affirm that he was doing all the right things.

But Jesus turns the table... Give up all the comforts and come follow ME.

The young man walks away very shaken up. And maybe that's a good thing. He is going to have to dwell on what Jesus said to him... And SO ARE YOU.

If Jesus' words today don't make you just the littlest bit uncomfortable... force you to examine what *you* look to for your source of comfort and see that if it's anything but our Lord Jesus Christ, then you, too, have an idol you look to for comfort.

Jesus' disciples are the most perplexed. In some ways THEY DID exactly what the young man was asked to do... They gave up everything to follow Jesus. They could have heard Jesus saying this to that rich young ruler and been made to feel very comfortable... ("See... We gave it up for you. We are DOING EXACTLY what you said, Jesus... I guess WE are OK.")

But they don't feel that at all. When Jesus says to them... How difficult it is for the rich in material wealth to enter the kingdom (because who is more comfortable in the world than the wealthy), they are deeply distressed. If THEY can't hope to enter the kingdom of God... how can WE?

And Jesus tells them the Gospel... With human beings? It is indeed IMPOSSIBLE. But with God, all things are possible.

27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

In other words, it's not what you DO... It's who YOU ARE IN ME that allows you to enter the kingdom. You are my disciples. Maybe it would benefit the world a little bit... if you acted like it.

AMEN