

Sermon July 17 2022 – The Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 51:1-2 (International Children’s Bible) (from Time with Children)

God, be merciful to me because you are loving. Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs. Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again.

SCRIPTURE: Amos 8:1-12

This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the LORD said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord GOD; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; 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.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.

SERMON: “At the Heart of It” The Rev. Brent Damrow

I want to give thanks to Ed, who after that reading said “Thanks be to God.” And I want to give thanks because I got to sit and watch your faces as the Scripture was being read. And when the passage started with this big basket of ripe fruit, I saw smiles out there. It’s amazing how quickly things changed. I can imagine Amos at the end of it just want to say, “Yes, but God, what about that fruit?” But you see to be a prophet means that Amos was deeply rooted in the love of God.

So as we encounter these words today, will you pray with me? Loving God, root us deeply in your love. Root us deeply in your grace, that we may encounter these words and this truth with open hearts and with hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is a quiet and yet a beautiful way to start the day. On Wednesday morning, a small group of folks from this church gather to start the day well. Just like this passage and the basket of fruit, to start the day on Wednesday in fullness and bounty and blessing. The gathering begins with conversation, people sharing the stuff of life. It takes the next step with silence, followed by music, and then a gentle calling to prayer. And while the liturgy changes from time to time, morning prayer on Wednesday always, always, includes a time for us to remember our blessings and then to share them out loud. That time of quiet contemplation yields to the sound of voices naming out loud the blessing of people whose touch graces our existence. The blessings of places and beauty that provide peace or expansion in our lives. The blessings of grace and God and goodness, too. And in that moment when we express gratitude, when we name and honor and remember those things that are so easy to take for granted, something changes. You can feel it. Well, you could feel it when we're in the room together. I think you can still feel it over Zoom. We bring our heart and our mind and our lives, and pay attention to those things, like that basket of fruit, that are so abundant in our living.

This summer, it's ridiculous, isn't it? Here in the Berkshires, how many blessings do we have? How amazing has this summer been, coming out of the pandemic, with all the glory of this nearly perfect weather? How many blessings are there? Like on Wednesday mornings, would you take a moment of silence, and let at least one blessing float to your mind's eye right now. And now, just like Wednesday mornings, would you be so bold as to name one of them out loud? (*Congregation: walking in the woods, singing, kayaking, family, garden, music, golf, swimming, church, grilling, a family of friends.*) Paying attention to blessings with gratitude, never taking them for granted.

Another of my spiritual heroes, Brother David Steindl-Rast, says that so often in life we get it all backwards. While we proclaim that acquiring good things, acquiring blessings, will beget gratefulness. Steindl-Rast says that it's the complete opposite: Live a life of gratefulness and then you will notice that everything is indeed a blessing out there.

Another wise sage, Cris Raymond, is right here in our congregation. For the last three years I have been greeting her and I ask her how she's doing. I get a one-word answer every time: grateful. When asked how life is, Cris responds that she is grateful. What a way to start. Just like that basket of fruit.

In this searing passage from Amos, it starts right there, with abundance, with grace, with that basket of fruit. What do you see, God says. And I puzzled over Amos's answer because, after all, he is a prophet, and yet he is content to simply say a basket of fruit. Come on, Amos, what about your abundance from God? What about your gift? What about your love? What about the amazingness of life? What about some phrase that you as a prophet are far more capable of than I?

Sometimes I worry for us, too, that we look around and see all the blessings of our lives, and instead of naming what they really are – grace-filled beauty, yes even the grill, even golf – grace-filled beauty, all of it, we name them what we understand them to be. Something as simple as calling something as delicious as the fresh strawberry with juice dripping down your chin, and simply calling it fruit.

Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun write that what God wants for us is not a basket of fruit, but lives of flourishing. And I sometimes worry, as they do, that we either come to take all those blessings for granted, or that we see them as birthrights, or something that we have somehow earned. Or worse yet, we fail to notice all the blessings around us.

Amos at this time was writing to a deeply blessed and prosperous community in Israel, one that had been led out of slavery in Egypt to that land of milk and honey, the land of peace and prosperity, that place that once was only a promise and a dream for people who were suffering. And the people had grown prosperous in Israel. They had discovered this thing called wealth. They had come to see full baskets of fruit not as indescribable awesomeness but rather as what they had come to expect out of this thing called life.

And some among them, with the taste of goodness now on their tongue, yearned for more. They wanted more. And they created a society in Israel that had the greatest wealth disparity that nation had ever known. Those who wanted more found ways to get it, on the backs of those who simply wanted to feel the juice of a strawberry dripping down their chin.

In this passage, Amos names the truth that there were people sitting in a place like this sanctuary saying when will this service finally be over? When, in fact, will Sabbath day be over, so I can get back to work? So I can get back to getting all that stuff that I love? They were sitting there in worship saying how can we cheat those we sell to so that they don't notice but we get richer. I know that doesn't happen now, so thank goodness we figured it out! How can we, as you heard in *The Message* translation, package up stuff that isn't really even food, and sell it cheap so people will buy it, even if it has no nutritional value? But hey, we're going to make money.

In this passage is one of the most stinging comments in the whole Bible, one that I've never been able to let go, one that lingers on my heart: buying the poor for silver, getting the needy for a new pair of sandals. It is, after all, a statement a prophet would make, a statement designed to be hard to shake, especially when there is a bit too much truth in it for comfort.

I think today when we hear "prophet," we think about justice. And wow, Amos. If you read Amos, he sounds a clarion call. In this passage, Amos does what many prophets do. He draws the people back to that deliverance from Egypt with stories of the darkness at midday, the loss of the firstborn. There are clear references in this passage to the plagues, and the one that finally softened Pharaoh's heart and led to freedom. The one that led to an outpouring of gratitude.

Do you remember when the people left Egypt? Do you remember what they did spontaneously, all 685,000 of them? Remember, after crossing the Red Sea? The Bible says that there was a group of them that would sing, the men would sing this great song. And then there was Miriam, and all the women with her, the Bible says, that would dance and cry, and lead the people in joy. That far into their journey they remembered the God of blessing. They sang out in detail about what God had done. And yet now that they are settled in and settled down, that basket of fruit was expectation, not hope. And the people wanted more.

At the heart of the prophetic call, though, is never just a call for what we know is justice. But also the reason beneath it. And here for Amos it is that God gives graciously that we might

flourish. God gives graciously that all might have enough, not just a few. That we might live abundantly. That we might be our sister's keeper, and our sister might be ours, too.

While Amos is railing about poverty in this passage, he is not just concerned about the lack of material wealth, but rather the suffering that transcends it all. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino insists that poverty is more than that. Instead, poverty is an expression of the denial of a place at the table. That poverty results in the difficulty of the most essential human dignified things, like forming a home. It denies not just food or clothing, but it denies a full place in community. Poverty and economic injustice, he says, strikes at the very humanity of the poor, and thus at the very heart of God.

Carolyn Sharp is a brilliant teacher of Hebrew Scripture at Yale Divinity School. She takes Jon Sobrino's statement and takes it a step further. She says that the prophetic calls aren't just reminders to us of the rules or commandments of the Torah for right living. They are issuing exhortations for us to stop ignoring and despising the heart of God.

Centuries after Amos, it would be the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who used the words of Amos over and over again, as he fought for the recognition of the inherent full humanity of people of color. More than any other passage, he would call on this: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Just like they did on that army of that oppressor, Pharaoh. Just like God is threatening Israel here in this passage.

Just like, perhaps, you and I need to hear today, maybe even deserve to hear today. For in our own society, the gap between rich and poor is growing. It is not just chaff that we round up for food, but foods overly processed, laden with artificial ingredients, specifically designed to be sold to the poor in the inner city stores. For the poor aren't being marginalized for something as useful as a pair of sandals anymore, but luxury cars, exotic experiences, and lavish table spreads.

The other day I saw a sight I'd never seen before. I'm a bit of a car nut. Driving down Route 7 to Great Barrington, I saw the unmistakable orange of a Lamborghini coming at me. It was exciting – beauty, art, power. But following that Lamborghini were a couple Ferraris, more Lamborghinis, Corvettes, the seemingly pedantic Porsche now and then. And a couple of cars I've never seen in my life on the road, a Ford GT among them. In the way they drove, they flaunted their vehicles, roaring and swerving between Subarus and Toyotas, as they made their way north here to Stockbridge. I've got to admit, I'd never seen anything like it. And my first thought was wow, I wish I'd taken a video of that to show to my son Jake who is absolutely into cars. But as it settled, I became more uneasy. And ever more so when the most popular response I got when telling people about it was, yep, that's life in the Berkshires, isn't it? The amazement began to turn a little bit sour, just like that basket of fruit which was about to spoil.

Amos proclaims truth to those of us who come to a place like this sanctuary, while living in bounty like the Berkshires. To live a life of faith in God, to walk hand in hand with Christ, means never forgetting where our blessings come from, and what it means. Absolutely yes, God loves us, that God showers us with grace, and that we are called to let it wash over us with our head up, our arms stretched out, and our mouths open wide to drink it all in. God is a God of bounty. But then having experienced it, we are not to hoard it or take it for granted, but to search out all those

for whom life is not full, and make it so for them. Not rest, but sacrifice until hope is rekindled and joy is found. Not just for a precious few, but for all.

Tattoo-covered, colorful-language-speaking, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber echoes Amos when she proclaims over and over again, I don't know why people like those in Stockbridge, she would say, always pray for God to draw near. For when God does draw near, we are compelled to leave our comfort for the sake of the comfort of others, just like Jesus did all the way to the cross.

Rachel Held Evans lifts up the challenge of that way of the ministry of Christ. She says this: "What I love about the ministry of Jesus is that he identified the poor as blessed, and the rich as needy. And then he went and ministered to them both. This, I think, is the difference between charity and justice. Justice means moving beyond the dichotomy between those who need and those who supply, and confronting the frightening and beautiful reality that we all desperately need each other."

And maybe, just maybe, there is hope in this searing passage of Amos, with God's foretelling of that day that will be bitter by the end, that day when celebration becomes mourning, where singing becomes wailing. For while I think there is a clear echo to Exodus and the plagues, in that darkness that covers the land at noon, and in the loss of a firstborn, and in that day of a celebration gone wrong, all of that sings out to me about another day, too, when God met humanity's worst with more grace than we can comprehend. That day 2,000 years ago when the celebration of Passover turned to betrayal. When darkness covered the land when the faithful mourned, and the women wailed. That day of crucifixion on Calvary, when God turned mourning into dancing. When God proclaimed judgment by standing with all of us and judging sin and death itself.

You see, prophets always stand by the people, and God always stands by the people, which is why you should always read Amos, because he will remind you of how good it is. Prophets never settle for anything but the best, because God wants only the best, and not for a scarce few but for all. For you and for me and for the poor out there struggling, not for a basket of fruit, but even to remember what fresh fruit even tastes like. And remember, just as God didn't look away, we are called to notice, too. To not just be content with enjoying the absurd bounty of the life we have here. But then afterwards, filled and renewed, to go to the same lengths God did to offer such life to those for whom it is but fantasy or dream.

Friends, in this passage Amos isn't bemoaning bounty, for he knew bounty to be at the heart of God. But he did call out against all those who gather it all for themselves, more and more, while remaining oblivious to the injustice, discrimination and violence from the system on which it is based. Amos cries out not against luxuries like full baskets of fruit, for he knew generosity to be at the heart of God, but rather the way that we tend to make those things a zero sum game rather than committing ourselves to seek out those who only dream of such things, and sharing it until all can experience it.

Amos calls for a new way of life that, instead of only holding those treasures to our heart, honors and treasures the heart of the One who loves the world so much so as to send his only Child to

save us all. Honoring God's heart by loving the least, by finding the lost, and in doing so by finding ourselves, too.

Friends, I want you to soak in every moment of this beautiful summer. Cherish every single ridiculous blessing that we have. And then, remember resurrection. Remember the fact that since God can bring Christ back to life, the fact that God can defeat death itself means that God can bring back all the beautiful things that we have killed, too, whether in our own living or in our own culture.

What do you see, God asks us today. May we see bounty. May we see love. May we engage this world and the systems that are not yet just, until the fullness of our bounty creates fullness of life, not just for some but for all. And then may the day end as beautifully as it started, in the warm embrace of gratitude. Amen.