

Series: The Minor Prophets
“Amos: I Want Justice!”

The time is about 750 B.C. In a backwoods area of ancient Judah there's a sheep herder, who's also a dresser of sycamore trees (a type of fig tree). Since the market for his goods is not great in his backwoods area, twice a year he takes his wool and figs to the northern kingdom of Israel, into the town of Bethel, to sell them. The man's name is Amos.

There was an ancient sanctuary in Bethel. As he laid out his goods in the market place, he'd watch the people as they thronged to worship. Israel was very prosperous during this period under King Jereboam II. Amos would notice the people going into the ancient sanctuary, dressed in fine silks, carrying bags of gold, owning superb animals. He was impressed by the good times and the high standard of living there. But he also couldn't help but notice that there were *beggars*, and the rich worshipers wouldn't bother with the beggars.

Sure enough, there *was* a revival of religion there, but Amos kept saying, “There's something wrong.” Then, after one of these twice a year trips, Amos felt God calling him to prophesy! So, the next trip to Bethel wasn't a business trip! He didn't go there as Amos the tradesman, but as *Amos the prophet*.

Now even though Amos wasn't highly educated, he was no dummy! He used a clever approach to get the people's attention. He began to preach about the sins of *other nations – Israel's enemies*, and how God would judge them. “For three transgressions of *Gaza*, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...”. “For three transgressions of *Tyre*, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...”. “For three transgressions of *Edom*, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...”. But then he lowered the boom! “Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of *Israel*, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...” (Amos 2:6).

Amos is blunt and tells it like it is, as he catalogues Israel's sins. *He points to their injustices against the poor and needy*. They “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:7). “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David improvise on instruments of music, who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:4-6). Well-to-do people enjoy the pleasures of the wealthy, oblivious to the suffering of those around them, and the moral collapse of the nation.

Business life is filled with dishonesty and deceit. Merchants rig the scales to show false weights (Amos 8:5).

The justice system is anything but just. Court justices take bribes, and favor the wealthy: “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” (Amos 5:12).

There is sexual immorality. “Father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned” (Amos 2:7b).

Yet, there is religion! People are flocking to worship! But there was no protest against the injustices to the poor and the moral decay of the land. To Amos, all of this was a symptom of a “sickness unto death” – that Israel had separated herself from God and broken covenant with God. Amos warns of a coming judgment! He urges the people to seek the Lord, to return to the Lord. If they don’t change their ways, God’s judgment is coming! “Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it” (Amos 5:6).

These are hard words! Amos is one of those courageous prophets of the 8th century B.C., calling God’s people back to God. The classic verse from Amos is perhaps Amos 5:24: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

Here’s something to think about: If Amos were alive today, living in the U.S., what do you think Amos would say to us? What are the *justice* issues that he would address in our country? Justice is every person getting a fair shake. What are the *moral* issues he would speak out against.

Let’s try to imagine. *Amos spoke out against the rich and powerful taking advantage of the poor and marginalized.* Certainly that’s been part of our nation’s history. *Slavery.* Violating the civil rights and human dignity of black Americans. Even after the abolition of slavery, the uphill fight for equal rights, and the whole civil rights movement.

Our inhumanity towards Native Americans. Seizing their lands. I’ve recently gotten into a series streamed on TV a while back called *Longmire*, about a sheriff in Wyoming. I don’t know how accurate their depiction of the Native American situation today, but it portrays the present plight of American Indians as very difficult and unfair - systemic injustices they still suffer.

The whole theme of the rich taking advantage of the poor is played out in the political world of today. *The widening gap between rich and poor.* Perhaps in its most blatant form, CEO’s making millions of dollars, with extra perks and bonuses, while workers in their company are being laid off. This whole matter of economic justice is one reason some push for an increase in the minimum wage. Others blame *capitalism* for the problem. Progressive politicians push for “income equality” – which is basically taking from the rich and giving that money to the poor. The push towards socialism is gaining ground among young people, as a way of leveling the playing field economically. Others insist that this destroys the incentive to work and succeed. And that while the intent may be noble, this total makeover of our economic system – from capitalism to socialism – ditching the free enterprise system – would destroy what has made our country excel.

Certainly the desire to make America’s wealth available to all of our citizens is an important goal if we are to have the justice Amos speaks about.

Amos spoke out against the lack of honesty and integrity in business life. *How about all the scams.* People being scammed out of hundreds, thousands of dollars. It’s hard to keep up with

the scammers, isn't it. The bad guys always seem to be one step ahead of law enforcement agents.

Just the way some companies do business is a justice issue. Several years ago on the way down to Florida on vacation our air conditioning conked out. Since we were staying almost a month, I decided to try to get it fixed. Went to *Miracle Toyota!* I thought, wow, *Miracle Toyota*, they must be Christians, people I can trust. (I hope they weren't Christians, because the way they operated wasn't very ethical!). I wound up writing a letter of complaint to the Better Business Bureau in that area of Florida.

Or just the little tricks that companies have. Perhaps the modern equivalent of rigging the scales is when you open the cereal box and see that the box is only 3/4 or 2/3 full (and costs more, too).

Amos also indicted the people of Israel for the injustice in their courts of law. Judges who take a bribe, and condemn the righteous. I've read studies over the years that have indicated that not everyone gets equal and fair treatment in our criminal justice system. That if you're a minority, you don't get equal justice. I'm prone to think that's been true.

However, something else is happening in our law courts today. This is Bethany MaGee. (*Photo*). Bethany is 26 years old. Described as "very soft-spoken, very gentle". Part of a wonderful, church-going family. This past November 17th, Bethany was riding a train in Chicago, when a man walked up to her, took an iced tea bottle filled with gasoline, poured it on her, and set her on fire. More than half of her body was burned. She survived, but her life will never be the same. The man who did this is 50 year-old Lawrence Reed, who had been arrested 72 times over the past 32 years, most recently last August for hitting a social worker so hard that she was knocked out. But Cook Country judge Teresa Molina-Gonzalez, let Reed walk free with an ankle monitor, despite the prosecution's request to keep him behind bars.

That incident was similar to what happened to Iryna Zarutska, (*Photo*). Iryna had fled the war in Ukraine in 2022 to seek peace and a new life in the United States. On the night of August 22 of last year she boarded a train in Charlotte, NC, and was stabbed to death by Decarlos Brown Jr., 34. Surveillance video showed no interaction between the two before he killed her. He had 14 prior arrests, including three felony convictions. 7 months before he did this, he appeared in court for another arrest, and was released on a written promise to appear in court. He did not have to post a bond.

And yet there is another side to the picture. Most of my life I've been pretty set in the view that if you've committed a crime, you pay the price! And prisons aren't meant to be a fun place to be! But I had a good friend who got in trouble, was sent to a Federal prison (died there). And I got to see the other side of the picture – what seemed to be unfair treatment he had to endure, plus the fact that not all of these prisoners were psychopaths or sociopaths, but human beings who had made some serious mistakes in life.

Amos also spoke out against the sexual immorality of his time. Is that an issue today? In our

culture, to put forth the idea that God intended the full act of sexual love to be reserved for marriage would make some people chuckle, and brand you as woefully out of touch, or a relic of past thinking. Or the notion that you get married, *and then* have children, in that order!

God spoke through Amos of the need for social justice, and so many of the issues we face in life are justice issues: seeing that things are fair, and everybody gets a fair shake.

Amos would remind us that genuine faith, true religion, always has a concern for people in society. Religion, faith, is more than just going to church, reciting prayers, practicing religious rituals. It's more than just my personal relationship with God. True faith has a *public* aspect to it. To address the evils of society. To stand up for those who are being hurt and abused, those getting the short end of the stick.

God detests religion without concern for one's fellow man. "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 water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24). When Christianity is at its best, it blends both the personal and social dimensions of the gospel.

Christians generally are pretty good at showing compassion on people who are hurting. But sometimes Christians need to address the structures in society that hurt people, that dehumanize people, that keep them from the opportunity to fulfill their God-given destiny.

Jim Wallis tells of hearing a story on the radio. A reporter was covering conflict in the middle of Sarajevo, and saw a little girl being shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil and stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to the man who was holding the child, and helped them both into his car. As the reporter stopped on the accelerator racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding child said, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still alive." A moment or two later: "Hurry, my friend, my child is still breathing." moment later: "Hurry, my friend, my child is still warm." Finally, "O God, my child is getting cold." When they got to the hospital, the child was dead. As the two men were in the lavatory, washing the blood off their hands and their clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said, "This is a terrible task for me. I must go tell her father his child is dead. He'll be heartbroken." The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, "I thought she was your child." The man looked back and said, "No, but aren't they all our children?"

For many of us, the whole discussion about social justice doesn't mean much. To hear about it in sermons may even bore us. And too often it's only when *we are the ones on the receiving end of something unfair* that we get interested. To be a follower of Christ means that we move to that place where we are just as concerned about someone else being treated unfairly as we about our own welfare.

