

"Real Religion"

It's about 750 BC in the northern kingdom of Israel. In many ways it's a time of abundance and prosperity. Religion is also flourishing: worshipers flock to the ancient sanctuary in Bethel. But beneath the surface all is not well with God's people Israel. And God uses an ordinary farmer named Amos – a *farmer* from the backwoods country – to speak to God's people.

Their religion is part of the problem. God's message to His people is summarized in this classic passage from the Book of Amos in the Old Testament: "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" (Amos 5:21-23). God hates their religious festivals and gatherings. He will not accept their sacrificial offerings. He won't listen to their worship songs!

What does God want then? It's this: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). "Justice". Treat people right. Be honest. Be fair. God isn't against people gathering to worship Him. He doesn't want people to stop going to church! But our worship must be linked to *ethical living*.

The Book of Amos lists some of the sins of the people. Judges took bribes, and perverted justice in the courts. Poor and needy people were taken advantage of or ignored. There was sexual immorality: a father and his son would both have sex with the same temple prostitute. Business people cheated customers by using false weights and scales. Rich people were contented and were oblivious to the moral decay of the nation. Even many who attended worship couldn't wait for it to be over so they could get back to their business ventures on the Sabbath. God says, I don't want your hollow worship and ritual! Real religion is not just going through the motions of worship. You have to live right and treat people right!

Amos was not the only person God picked to confront His people on this issue. God used the prophet Isaiah to deliver a similar message to God's people. "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more! Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them" (Isaiah 1:11-14). Again, there was plenty of religion. But God says I'm sick of your religious sacrifices, your church meetings.

God continues, "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (verse 15). God says He won't even listen to their prayers! What does God want? "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:16-17). They are to stop doing evil. Live right! Seek justice. Reach out to the oppressed. Defend the weak and

vulnerable. God used other prophets also to deliver the same message!

So what's this say to us? Well, the obvious thing is that God wants more from us than just coming to church and going through the motions of worship: repeating prayers...singing the songs...giving an offering...hearing a sermon. Yes, worshiping God together is an integral part of Biblical faith. But genuine worship should motivate and inspire us to live with integrity, and fulfill our moral obligations to our fellow human beings?

God wants justice! What is justice? It's fairness - seeing that everybody gets a fair shake.

So many common issues in life are justice related. The 9 year-old complains that her 12 year-old sister can stay up later than her. "That's not fair!" she whines to her parents. The baseball player sits on the bench while another player who isn't as good gets to play – because his dad is a close friend of the coach. You find out the slacker in your office or store is getting paid as much, if not more, than you (even though you wind up doing some of his or her work). You're angry! Think of all the situations in life where we've felt that we ourselves – or someone we know – has gotten the short end of the stick. *Justice!*

Then you expand this kind of one-on-one "what's fair" situation to society at large...and we're talking about "*social justice*." The cry of the prophets is that God wants His people to work for justice in society, where every person and every group gets a fair shake.

This Old Testament theme is carried over into the New Testament. The Book of James, for example, tells us this: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

Orphans and widows were among the most vulnerable, powerless, at-risk people in the ancient world, and God's people are commanded to not ignore their needs. On my last trip to Kenya the last day there our group spent some time in a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, before we went to the airport for our flight home. We met up with a young family from the U.S. who had gone there to establish a home and shelter for *widows and orphans*. In fact the name of their facility had in it the term "widows and orphans" – taken directly from James 1:27. Part of the mission of the Church, God's people, is to see that the weak and vulnerable are not forgotten.

Yet Christians often have had differences of opinion on how we do that, and what justice look like. There's been a long standing tension (even conflict) between *evangelicals* and *social action oriented* Christians. There are the *evangelicals* – who focus on having a personal experience with Christ, being born again. And on the other hand there are the *social action* type Christians who focus on things like racial justice, gay rights, helping the poor, etc. Evangelicals criticize social action people for not "sticking to the gospel" and emphasizing personal salvation. The social action people accuse evangelicals of ignoring the Scriptural call for justice.

So which is it? *It's both!* Someone has said these are the two legs on which the gospel stands. Personal salvation and social action. In our United Methodist tradition, John Wesley, the

founder of Methodism, was able to blend these two aspects of the faith beautifully. He was an evangelist. He dared to go outside of the church walls to bring the gospel to people neglected in the English society of the 1700's. He won thousands to Christ with his preaching. But he and those in the Methodist movement were heavily involved in personally ministering to the needs of poor, visiting prisons and working for prison reform. They started up schools for poor children, and fought for the abolition of slavery. Methodism changed English society in the 18th century!

We need both! An evangelical fervor to win the lost to Christ, but also a commitment to working for justice in society. We have a "two-legged gospel".

So, this is a good place to end the sermon. Hopefully we've seen that if we're followers of Jesus we are called to do what we can to help all people and all groups get a fair shake. End of sermon!

But how do we do that in this setting today where people in our country have such widely different views on what justice looks like – where social activism has become so angry and hateful? Take any issue – the economy, government spending, cancelling student debt, immigration, abortion, climate change, gay marriage – and you'll get different answers. Ask a Republican what justice looks like in these matters, and you'll get one answer; ask a Democrat and you'll get another answer. And unfortunately, the church often reflects what's happening in the larger culture – where conservatives and evangelicals are often Republicans, and see things one way. Social action oriented Christians are often Democrats, and have a different take.

*So how do we fulfill God's call to work for justice in this inflammatory setting? I really struggled with what to say in this message. I don't want to get into politics and take sides and alienate half the congregation. (Remember, God is not a Republican, and God is not a Democrat!). While pondering this, I've been reading a book about President John F. Kennedy – Arthur Schlesinger's book *A Thousand Days*. And I came across something that kind of gave me some direction. The writer said that Kennedy liked to quote Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln once said, "There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two, so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded."*

Isn't that true? Republicans like to think that their position on issues is entirely good, and that what the Democrats propose is entirely bad. Democrats like to think their views are wholly good and Republicans' position on issues is wholly evil. *But the question of what's fair, what's just, is often more complex than just our limited perspective. And most always, no position from either party is totally good or evil.*

And if we can take that seriously, we might be able to work more creatively to create a more just society and world. Let me just mention one current issues facing our country: (What I will say here is not dazzling rocket science, just common sense. But hopefully it will be helpful to our discussion).

Think about the matter of immigration and our country's southern border. Should we allow foreigners into our country so they can become U.S. citizens? Should we welcome people from other countries?

Certainly there is a Biblical basis for saying "Yes". Exodus 22:21 commands: "Don't mistreat or oppress an immigrant, because you were once immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Common English Bible). Leviticus 19:33-34 tells us, "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt."

Our nation has been shaped and enriched by immigrants who have come to our shores throughout our history. Who of us has not had a heart of compassion for those who leave their country and even family behind to try to start a new life in the United States? God commands us to welcome them and love them! Especially when we welcome people escaping harassment or persecution, *that's social justice!*

But does that mean we let everyone come in? You've probably seen news clips of our southern border. Currently about 7,000 migrants are coming in *every day*. If the Title 42 government program is lifted estimates are that up to 18,000 people will come into our country *every day*.

All of these people are entering *illegally*.

If we let them in is that fair to those people who have come into our country legally, and done what was required to become U.S. citizens?

Is that fair to the men and women who work for our border patrol? How can you process and screen 7,000 people daily? Do we know who's coming in? Reports indicate drug smugglers, even persons on our terrorist lists, are entering.

Illust. *Show picture.* Do you know who this is? This is a Texas National Guardsman, 22 year-old Bishop E. Evans. He was on duty, helping the border patrol, when he saw two migrants in the river yelling for help. Fearing that they would drown, he jumped in, went under, and never surfaced. The two men he tried to save were smuggling drugs into our country. How fair was that?

Is the current scenario fair to people living in towns near the border, where residents have said you never know who's going to show up on your doorstep?

Does this represent justice for business owners near the border? One business owner interviewed said he will probably have to go out of business because no one wants to patronize his business with thousands of migrants squatting on the land. Video showed his property overrun with trash and human waste.

So, having a heart of compassion, and a desire that people all over the world can have the

opportunity to enjoy the benefits of our country, dictates that we welcome foreigners into our country and treat them with dignity.

But this needs to be balanced with a concern for justice *for everyone* impacted by what we do as a country in our immigration policies and procedures.

As I said, this is not a startling new revelation here. You knew this, in your heart, that we need to seek justice *for everyone* involved in the issues we are facing. And I think this can most likely happen when we recall Abraham Lincoln's words: "There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two...".

Having said all of this, let's not forget, however, the words God spoke through the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Let me close with a Pontius Puddle cartoon. It begins, "I wonder if God can really hear me." The next frame shows Pontius praying, "Hey God, what should I do with my life?" The third frame has a voice from heaven saying, "Feed the hungry. Right injustice. Work for peace." Pontius replies: "Just testing." God speaks back, "Same here."

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