

Sermon: Enter the Kingdom of God

New North Church, Hingham

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14 October 2018

Based on **Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Mark 10:17-31**

Once again in Mark's Gospel, we're picking up where we left off. Today, the lectionary pairs Mark with a reading from the prophet Amos. That passage is part of a larger lament regarding God's displeasure with Israel's behavior as a society. Today's reading from Mark builds on last week's notion of how we must receive the kingdom of God as a gift, by describing what must then be done to enter the kingdom. Mark and Amos complement each other by showing us that seeking God is both a religious commitment and a moral one.

Gloria María Milagrosa Fajardo, a singer known to us as Gloria Estefan, once sang that we 'seal our fate with the choices we make.' That seems like the message Amos is sending to the house of Joseph, to the nation Israel.

Whenever we read from the prophets, we must gauge their mood in any given passage, unless we read the entire book in one go. When we read Amos, it's helpful to know that the book is made up of long speeches, short prophetic sayings, visions, and finally, words of comfort addressed to both Israel and Judah. It's helpful because his mood changes from one chapter to the next. Today, he's a little het up, as they say.

Overall, Amos affirms Israel's special relationship with God while stressing that with it goes an ethical responsibility. So, if we 'seal our fate with the choices we make,' Amos reminds us that we are never entirely abandoned by God. We can make a bad choice, but God remains faithful. We can restore our fate by seeking God anew.

Amos was active seven or eight hundred years before Jesus began his ministry. Scripture tells us that he was a farmer from Judah, the southern kingdom, which made him an outsider in Israel, the northern kingdom, where his words were not always welcome. He may condemn society for how it treats the poor, but he also stands with those he condemns. He's not pointing fingers; he's saying look at what we've become.

In Israel at the time, politically, militarily, all seemed peaceful. Israel was not at war with anyone and things were pretty quiet. A cop on the beat would be happy. But Amos exposed what was happening to those who were invisible to the ruling class, to all those who had no voice. Not all was well beneath the surface.

To Amos, Israel itself has become the enemy because it has become greedy, violent, and deaf to the words of God.

There was a consensus view then, and perhaps it is still true now, that having material wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Amos challenges that idea. If it were true that wealth equaled God's blessing, then that meant God was blessing only the wealthy. But the people knew that the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor, and that corruption had seeped into all levels of society. Is wealth a blessing if it's stolen from someone else? What good is material wealth if the kingdom of God is closed to you?

This is the question Jesus asks the man who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, which is life in the kingdom. In his eyes, he has lived a good life; he hasn't murdered anyone, which is always a good start, and he hasn't violated any of God's other commandments that were meant to protect his neighbors and keep the peace.

In Jesus' time, wealth was relative: if you had enough to eat, were well-clothed, and had a comfortable place to live, you were rich. The man in question says that he came by his wealth and possessions honestly; he just can't seem to give them up.

Jesus had compassion for this guy. He said the man lacked only one thing. Then he said, go and sell all your stuff, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and *then* – come, follow me. He offered the man an invitation to discipleship, which may be the one thing the man lacked.

He didn't take it well. It could be that he was shocked by the requirement to serve the poor, and he may have been grieved either by the idea of giving up his possessions or by the thought that he couldn't follow Jesus unless he did so.

The disciples were astounded to hear that it would be impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. They were still stuck in thinking that wealth was a blessing; if the wealthy couldn't get in, then who can be saved? Jesus is telling them to look at it in another way: if the kingdom of God is worth less to you than all your stuff, you'll never get there. That's the connection to Amos: seek God, and live.

When we forget that we are God's people, as the people of Israel seem to have done in Amos's time, and when we forget to help and serve the least among us, God is quick to remind us of our moral duty, and usually not with the sort of words we want to hear. No one likes to be judged, let alone by outsiders like Amos or Jesus. But they're just the prophets delivering the message. Our judge is a god of mercy.

All around us, we see sketchy behavior day after day, in the news, in the halls of power, on our city streets. Will no one qualify to enter the kingdom of God, rich or poor?

Too many people struggle with their health, or with addictive behaviors, or with grief, family issues, and on and on. Wealth would seem like a blessing to them. We know that the *love* of money is the root of all evil, and that money can't buy happiness. Mark's teaching on wealth as a possible obstacle to discipleship challenges all Christians no matter where they live, especially here in the wealthiest nation on earth, but would selling your high-definition TV really be the way to enter the kingdom of God?

What are we left with? Have we, as a society, become so preoccupied with material goods that we've lost sight of what's really important? Have we let ourselves be distracted from realizing that God's kingdom is a *gift*?

Gloria Estefan sings, we 'seal our fate with the choices we make,' then adds, [It's] never worth the price you pay in the end

Instead of being ahead you're started over again.

Amos' call to repentance is ultimately a call to life. He reminds us that the reward for good behavior is life itself, with no conditions. Jesus amplifies that by saying good behavior helps but it's not enough. He and Amos both want us to make a religious and moral commitment to serve God and our neighbors.

They remind us that life is to be lived now, not just for our own ends, but for the benefit of the community around us. They remind us that God has a bigger purpose for us than we can imagine, and to be the voice for the voiceless, the champion of the oppressed, and the companion of the just.¹

Amen.

¹ Marci Auld Glass, "Proper Twenty-Three, Ordinary 28, Pentecost 20: October 14, 2012." *Lectionary Homiletics*. 2012. v. 23, n. 6, 11-18.