

## 21st Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

Last week I spoke about our need to change our worldview – from one that says humanity is above all creation and is thus justified in *using* anything and *anyone* to satisfy our own goals and desires, to one that sees humanity as a *part* of creation, *part* of the expression of Godself. *Today's* readings again are about changing our worldview - turning our worldview upside down.

In that first reading from Amos, we come into things in the middle, as is often the case with our lectionary readings. Amos had been happily working as a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees in the southern kingdom of Judah, and God calls him to go to the north, to the kingdom of Israel. Things there seemed, on the surface, to be in good shape. The king was keeping everything in order, the economy was flourishing – at least for the wealthy - some folks were prospering, people were flocking to worship in the synagogues. There was, generally, *prosperity*. And in walks Amos – who speaks these words from God, in the verses shortly before our text for today:

Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel;

Forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up (5:2).

God, it seems, sees things differently. Underneath the façade of prosperity, God sees the injustice, the greed, the affliction at the root of all the prosperity. And thus we have today's snippet from the prophet, with Amos urging the people to "Seek the Lord, and live." He urges the people – those who are flourishing – to stop pushing the poor out of the way at the gate – at the entrance to the city where people regularly gathered to settle disputes and make deals. Amos is asking the people, essentially, to relinquish their hold on the "prosperity gospel" - that worldview that says those who really love God and are loved by God will have bounty - that was all too alive and well in Israel. He is telling them that the only thing that will save them is relationship with God – not their accumulation of wealth, not keeping the letter of the law, not their walled city with a gate that only some may enter – but right relationship, with God and with one another. "Seek the Lord and Live... Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said."

“So the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” - Remember that in the worldview of those people at that time, being prosperous, being wealthy and powerful, was a sign that God was with you. People convinced themselves that their good fortune – even at the expense of others – was a *sign*, a surety, that God was with them. And Amos says, no. Seek God, “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate...” – so that the Lord, the God of hosts, will *really* be with you.

Amos is turning the worldview upside down – contrasting how things look to these prosperous ones with how things look with the eyes of God – and inviting the people once again into right relationship.

And we have the same thing going on in today’s gospel passage. A man, who we later find out has “many possessions” and so is relatively wealthy, comes and asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him, “You know the commandments...” But then note which commandments Jesus names: They are the commandments from the “second tablet,” if you will – the commandments that address how we live with one another. “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” Jesus tells him, to really have ‘eternal life’ – and he’s not talking about some life hereafter in a heaven in the clouds, but to be in tune with the God life already within him – he needs to live in right relationship with others. And then the man says, “I’ve followed the commandments since I was young – all my life.” It’s as if the man is saying, I’ve been keeping the rules – but in my heart I know there is something more... and Jesus looks on him with love – and says, “You’re right – there is more. And the “more” is the next step – let go of your possessions, use what you have to help those around you, and follow me. And we’re told that the man was shocked and went away grieving.... for he had many possessions.

Pay attention to the word “Shocked.” The ‘grieving’ we can understand, with the explanation we’re given. He didn’t want to give up all his possessions – that was too much to ask. But the word “shocked,” I think, gives us a deeper insight into what was really going on here. He was “shocked” – because his worldview – like those of all his religious ancestors – told him that his possessions, his wealth, were precisely the proof that he was, indeed, right with God.

And Jesus has just asked him to give up his worldview that following the commandments was responsible for his prosperity and wealth.

Episcopal priest TJ Tetzlaff got it right in his commentary on this gospel passage, I think. He says, speaking of this man:

“Perhaps he left because he was overly attached to his possessions and he couldn’t leave them to follow Christ, but I can’t help but wonder if he might also be grieving a long-held belief about how the world works. By telling him to give away all his possessions, Jesus may really be telling him that prosperity was not the result of keeping all the commandments since childhood. Perhaps what this man grieves isn’t just the loss of material wealth, but also years of believing that his possessions were proof of his faithfulness. As a result of his encounter with Jesus, he may have just lost his entire world view and how he has related to it, but that’s the risk we run by approaching Christ; the answer he gives us might not be what we want to hear and might leave us shaken.”

We are so much more comfortable with the worldview that says our “doing well” is a sign that we’re right with God, that we have God’s favor. Even in today’s psalm, we prayed that God would “return... and be gracious to your servants. May the graciousness of the LORD our God be upon us; prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork.” The accompanying belief, of course, is that if God loves us, if God is happy with us, then we will be rewarded, then good things will come to us.

The problem, perhaps, is not in *that* particular syllogism – but in our understanding of what constitutes “good things” – what constitutes “prospering,” - what God’s graciousness to us will look like.

When Jesus says, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” we are told that the disciples were “perplexed.” No wonder. Those who had wealth were assumed to be the ones who had God’s favor. They were perplexed because Jesus’s pronouncement doesn’t fit with how they thought things worked.

So when Peter starts off with “Look, we have left everything and followed you...” Jesus cuts in and answers Peter’s real question – “What about us?” If being prosperous and wealthy and powerful isn’t the payoff for following the rules, then what *is* the payoff? What will be the sign that we, by following you, by being in relationship with you, are making the right choice? And Jesus’s answer is this: You will have a home, a community, brothers and sisters, people who care about you – and, you will also have persecution.

Today, we celebrate the first of three rituals welcoming Jonathan Korpi into this community of faith. It’s a time for us to reflect on our own commitment to following Jesus, our own commitment to taking his worldview. Jonathan, we can offer you only what Jesus promises in today’s gospel: You will have a home here, a community, brothers and sisters – who will journey with you on the way, a way that is “upside down,” perhaps, from what the powers around us say is real and rewarding – but a way that your heart confirms is part of deepening your relationship with the God who loved you into being.

To paraphrase our opening collect, “May God’s grace always both precede and follow you, that you may continually be given to good works – through Christ the Lord.”

Amen.

[Amos 5:6-7,10-15](#)  
[Psalm 90:12-17](#)  
[Hebrews 4:12-16](#)  
[Mark 10:17-31](#)