

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
14 November 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Abundance is for All”

Fifth sermon in the 6-week series: *Table of Abundance*

Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

New Revised Standard Version

In Luke chapter 4, when Jesus goes into the synagogue in Nazareth, opens the scroll to Isaiah, and reads, *“the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4, 18-19) – which is Jubilee – the year when debts are released and everyone’s credit card balance – no matter how big – goes to Zero),” all Jesus is doing is reading to the people he calls his friends and family the text they call sacred and life-shaping. Nazareth is his hometown afterall. One would think this would be a familiar text and a friendly crowd. But in hearing these words the people are ready to throw Jesus off a cliff – literally – because their comfort is challenged and their priorities are pointed out as skewed. The people do not want to hear what Jesus has to say, even though what he is saying to them is what their scriptures have been saying to them their whole lives long. Jesus, the preacher, is

hurled out of his hometown for reading the words of Isaiah, the prophet.

I give us this context today just to drive home that the words of the prophets make us uncomfortable. They always have. Their job is to challenge and if we’re not challenged – we’re not listening!

Sometimes when we read prophets of the Old Testament, prophets who – in the case of Amos – were around 750 years or so before Jesus was born – we can think that by the time Jesus came into the world – the social ills of which Amos spoke are not as prevalent. Or that somehow the words of Jesus replace the words of the prophets. But in fact, Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets – as he himself says (Matthew 5:17), meaning he takes the prophets words and carries them even further, saying “today these words are fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21)! These are not ancient words for OTHERS *back then*; these are pressing

commands for US *here and now*.

Unlike Jesus, Amos was not in his hometown as he delivers his prophetic words. He was in the Northern Kingdom of Israel but he was from the Southern Kingdom of Judea...the town of Tekoa. He didn't come from a long line of esteemed prophets, he was a shepherd and a sycamore fig farmer. He was not poor or rich. He was middle class. In that way – he really was just “one of the people.” But, he had one of the toughest jobs because he was an outsider, a foreigner...telling people how to live their lives when he wasn't living with them as one of them. Being the outsider who is called in to call people to account – is never fun.

Amos is like the Consultant that the board of directors of a company calls in because there clearly need to be changes made, but everyone on *staff* at the company knows that when a consultant comes in –that means they are going to be told they need to change how they are doing their job or there's going to be some “re-structuring.” Outside eyes can see things we haven't been seeing – that's why a fresh perspective or a second opinion can be helpful.

But it can also be hard. Especially when whatever we haven't been seeing has been working just fine for us. When what we see is working for *us*, then so often we don't want to see that it's *not* working for others.

So the Consultant/Prophet Amos comes into the Northern Kingdom to bring a word from the Lord and the Lord ROARS (i.e. is very loud and forceful) – which is quite different to being like the sound of sheer silence when speaking to the prophet Elijah last week. And the roar is probably necessary because the people aren't poised to hear from God. They have no reason to really need to communicate with the Lord, because life is going really well for them. You see, Amos was active during King Jeroboam II's reign of Israel. It was a time of relative peace and prosperity for the people. Jeroboam II (c. 781–741 BC) had conquered Syria, Moab, and Ammon, vastly extending their territory and resources. The whole Northern empire had enjoyed a long period of peace and security marked by artistic revival and commercial development. But, as is often the case, when things are going well for some, social corruption and the oppression of

the poor and helpless become more prevalent for others.

And Amos is calling this disparity out – not only because the poor people are being neglected and not cared for – but because the people continue to worship in their synagogues reading the words of scripture and proclaiming that they are “a righteous people” – when in fact, they leave worship each week, and they do nothing in their daily lives to make the lives of others better or more just or equitable.

As one scholar said, “it’s a classic case of hypocrisy: the most religious people in society are callous toward the poor while parading around in the guise of piety.”¹ In fact, earlier in Amos 5, the people are accused of seeing someone in need and walking right past them as they enter the synagogue to worship. And others are named as ones who have enough money to use expensive materials such as stone to build their houses, while then putting an extra tax on wheat that the poor have to pay in order to eat.

All of *that* is what leads up to Amos 5:21-24. The Lord, through Amos, despises the worship of the people because they sing songs of praise to God and give some offerings in the Temple, but do not care for the poor in their midst. “*I despise your festivals...I will not accept your offerings...Take away from me the noise of your songs!*”

Now these are *important* words for us to pay attention to today here at Calvary on our Commitment Sunday, a festival type day when we walk down the aisle to offer to God our pledges and tithes and offerings while literally singing songs as we go! We are doing the very thing today, that the Lord despises in Amos.

But to be clear, the Lord despises these things when they are the *only* acts of faith that are done by the people. The Lord despises worship that is not coupled with justice. Singing that does not inspire sacrifice on behalf of others. Giving that does not benefit those most in need. In other words – the people of God – the church of God – cannot exist for itself, it

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, “NL Podcast 467: Amos: Justice Rolls Down,” *Working Preacher: Narrative Lectionary* (7 Nov. 2021) accessed on Nov. 14, 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/467-amos-justice-rolls-down-nov-14-2021>.

must exist for the community and for the benefit of ALL.

Interestingly, the number one reason people leave the church today is because they see hypocrisy; a church that cares more for itself than it does for the community or city in which it resides.² It's a good incentive to listen again to how our passage concludes – with poetic imagery that has captivated faithful activists for generations: “*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,*” (Amos 5:23-24).

The image of the ever-flowing stream is really important. In this part of the ancient world, there are not a lot of ever-flowing streams – the Jordan River is one, but way more common are wadis. When the rain comes, wadis form and provide water for a short time, but then they dry up the rest of the year. Wadis are the most common source of water around the desert landscape but they aren't consistent; they come and go. This is why Amos' language of “righteousness being like an ever-flowing stream” is so important. It means that

“righteousness” cannot be “on and off” – it must be a constant, something as ever-present and abundant as flowing water.³

If we are honest with ourselves, I think many of us would admit that as people of faith we too often think of justice and righteousness as something that we can turn “on and off.” We participate in a march for a group that needs our support. We give donations to a cause that could use our help. We sign a petition to make a certain legislative change. We hand money to a person who we see in need. These actions matter, but they are like the water that a wadi provides – intermittent and unreliable, dependent on how WE are feeling on any given day. But what does it mean for justice and righteousness to be *ever-flowing in our lives* and in our world?

Well, I think first we need to understand these two terms – they get thrown around a lot – justice and righteousness. In Hebrew, the word *mishpat* is often translated into English as “justice” and *tzedakah* is translated as “righteousness.” While *mishpat* is mentioned

² Chris Palusky, “Christians, let's stop fighting each other and serve our neighbors in need instead,” *USA TODAY* (29 June 2021), accessed on Nov. 14, 2021 at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2021/06>

/29/american-christians-turning-people-off-church-bethany-christian-services/5370555001/.

³ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

over 200 times in the Hebrew Bible, *mishpat* and *tzedakah* are often mentioned together such as in Amos 5:24 or Psalm 33:5 (“*He loves righteousness and justice...*”) or Psalm 106:3 (“*Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!*”)⁴ Together these words have deeper meaning than they do on their own.

Mishpat refers most commonly to rectifying justice, or retributive justice. This is what most of us think of when we think of justice. If a person breaks a law in the society, then they are held accountable for that, and we allow the courts to determine the appropriate ‘justice’ or penalty for their crime.

But – and this is *key* – by itself, *mishpat* (or justice) does not create a society in which ALL can flourish. While important for a FREE society, *mishpat* (or *rectifying justice*) alone cannot create a GOOD society. To it must be added *tzedakah*, which means distributive justice. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “One can imagine a society which fastidiously observes the rule of law, and yet contains so

much inequality that wealth is concentrated into the hands of the few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified existence. There may be high unemployment and widespread poverty. Some may live in palaces while others go homeless. That is not the kind of order [or ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’] that the Torah [commands]. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied, but also in how the daily means of existence – wealth as G-d’s blessing – are distributed. [Only then will society be “good” or “right.”] *That is tzedakah.*”⁵

This distinction is important because when most of us modern readers see the word “righteousness” in the Bible, we tend to think of it in terms of private or personal morality, or our diligence in prayer and Bible study. In other words, how “good” we are at NOT sinning or how “faithful” we are at spiritual disciplines. But *tzedakah* refers less to *being* right or *doing* right and more to *being in right relationship* with others. In the Bible, *tzedakah*

⁴ Renita Reed-Thomson, “Tzedakah and Mishpat: Righteousness and Justice,” *Discipling Market Place Leaders* (13 July 2020), accessed on 14 Nov. 2021 at <https://disciplinemarketplaceleaders.org/2020/07/13/tzedakah-and-mishpat-righteousness-and-justice/>.

⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Re’eh (5767) – Tzedakah: The Untranslatable Virtue,” [Rabbisacks.org](https://rabbisacks.org) (9 Aug. 2007), accessed on Nov. 14, 2021 at <https://rabbisacks.org/reeh-5767-tzedakah-the-untranslatable-virtue/>.

refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity.”⁶

As Tim Keller says, “*Tzedakah*, is a behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice – or *mishpat* – unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else! Therefore, while *tzedakah* is can be about being in a right relationship with God, the righteous life that results is profoundly social.”⁷ Because if we love God as God loves us, then we also love our neighbor as God loves them. Any understanding of ourselves in relationship to God, must be interpreted in light of how we are in relationships with one another. And in particular, as Jesus said, our relationship with the “least of these.”

So this begs this question: If the urgency of human suffering and inequity is all around us (and it is), then what are we doing if we are not doing everything in our power to not only intervene and alleviate the suffering of others, but to interrupt and abolish the

very systems that continue to cause such suffering? *This* is THE question at the heart of the message of God through the mouths of the prophets, ancient and modern.

And like all people who receive the words of the prophets, it can be easy to read and to hear these words as an indictment on our lives, and thus we take a defensive posture and try to justify how much we actually do do to help people. And as we’re feeling defensive, maybe we feel guilty – like what we are doing isn’t enough and it never will be. And then while we’re juggling feelings of defensiveness and guilt, why not toss into the mix feelings of helplessness (what can I really do to make a difference with poverty, hunger, homelessness, imprisonment??), and heck – why not resignation too? (well, Jesus said the poor will always be with us – so I guess life is just always gonna be this way.)

But *this* is exactly how the cycle of evil works. It keeps us juggling feelings of defensiveness, guilt, helplessness, and resignation --- and maybe blame too (because

⁶ Tim Keller, “Christianity and Social Justice: A further understanding of the Christian Call to Justice,” *Radiance* (20 June 2020), accessed on 14 Nov. 2021 at

<https://www.radiancesf.org/christianity-and-social-justice>.

⁷ Keller, *ibid*.

it's always the other political parties' fault) and because *it takes so much effort and energy* to keep all those balls of emotions (which are really excuses) in the air then we actually don't even realize that God is inviting us to drop all of the things we are juggling and just open our hands to receive. To stop getting caught up in the juggling evil of excuses and instead allow ourselves to imagine the dream which *can be* reality – “thy kin-dom come on earth as it is in heaven.” A dream which, as the prophet Amos says, invites us to SEEK GOOD, and not evil, so that we may LIVE. We are, in fact, to hate evil and love GOOD. We are to focus on what we *can* do and not on what we *cannot* do.

You see, whatever God is seeing in the people of Israel is leading God to believe that the people are not seeking good, but rather letting evil exist. And this doesn't mean that God thinks the people ARE evil or that the people are actively doing what we might call “evil deeds”...meaning actively starving people by taking food away from them, or creating orphans by abducting kids from their parents, or burning down the houses of people to make them homeless. Of course *those*

actions are evil. But rarely is *that* the evil of which scripture speaks. What Amos is speaking to here is not an evil that the people are creating by their action, as much as it is an evil they are perpetuating by their inaction, their choosing not to see, and most disturbing, *their choosing to believe that they do not have the power to change the circumstances of their society* so that no one hungers or thirsts in the first place.

So often in our lives, we understand justice to be what we do in our court systems to make ‘right’ an evil that is done to somebody by somebody else. But there are far greater evils that we all participate in by not doing something for many people. We like to individualize justice as it gives us someone to blame and someone to hold accountable (that's usually not us!). But the biblical prophets speak of justice and righteousness in a communal sense. And the hope and desire is not to send a bunch of individuals to jail for their bad or unfair actions, the hope is for the people to collectively change their ways and share their resources so that all may live freely and fully.

I don't know about you, but I found these explanations of *mishpat* and *tzedakah* were really helpful to me in understanding Amos' words and even Jesus' interpretation of Isaiah's words in Luke 4. To be a people who bring about justice and righteousness in society means: 1) it's a constant process, it's not "one and done," it's not something I can check off my check list or say, 'yep, finished up justice today' and 2) rather than keeping score on individuals – who's done right and who's done wrong, it's about being in *right relationship* with all people. Because anyone I'm in relationship with...I do not want to see go hungry or houseless or without access to water or healthcare. To be a people who "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" is to be a people who are constantly, then, expanding the relationships we are in. Because the more we are in relationship with one another, and with people very different than us, the more we have a chance at compassion and empathy that leads to justice, equity, and restoration of life – for all.

And here's the good news Calvary! This widening of

circles and expanding of relationships and perspectives is something that the church provides! There are few places left in society where one can go to be in intentional relationship with people who are very different than you, and yet who you care for and love nonetheless. There are few places left in society where we can go to read the pages of a text that really push us to look at our lives differently and not become complacent (i.e. the narrative lectionary assigning Amos 5 on Commitment Sunday!)

And while many places and communities encourage life-long learning, few offer grace and forgiveness as companions in that journey. For all learning (and un-learning) requires some deep and difficult dives into our behavior – past and present – in order to change how we move into the future.

We learn how to be in relationships in church – caring for one another in times of celebration and crisis. In church, we challenge ourselves to grow through faith formation – not leaving our Bibles on the shelf to get dusty – but opening these pages (or the app on our phone) to read and re-read words that

are often hard to understand at first, and yet somehow end up changing our lives the longer we wrestle with them.

As a church we are able to partner with multiple organizations who see the world in ways that we do not see it on a daily basis – missionaries who go to places we cannot go. As a church we learn from social justice organizations that raise our consciousness about the lives and perspectives of people that we are not seeing, but need to see and to meet and to love and to care for. And as a church, we gather together for worship to remember, week after week, what it means to seek GOOD and not evil...to be inspired by beauty and challenged toward change and transformation – so that we may truly LIVE!

The people who call those of us in the church hypocrites are not incorrect. We are often hypocritical. We say one thing and our actions do not back up what we believe or what we say we are about. It happens all the time. But we are not hypocritical because we are Christians. We are hypocritical because we are humans. Yet it is in fact the life and witness of *Christ*, and the words of the prophets who inspired *him*, who

keep us coming back to the Table again and again – to learn what it means to be a people who love God and love neighbor with abundance and without reservation. We will not always get it right. But when we do not, we will listen to the roaring voices of those inviting us remember their dignity and place at the Table, reflecting an image of God we would not fully see without them. And at the Table, we are not shamed for how we've messed up. We're forgiven and blessed so that we can show up in a different way tomorrow.

All of this takes continual commitment. Continual showing up. Continual sacrifice. Being part of a church is not for the faint of heart. But it is for the faithful...for the ones who truly want to find transformation in your life, and for the world. Calvary, thank you for your faithfulness year after year. We are here, hearing the words of Amos today, because of your generosity for generations.

I don't know about you, but I give to Calvary not just because of what I personally receive from this community (which is a lot) and I don't just give because of how many mission and justice organizations we

support who are doing work we cannot do on our own (although there are a lot)...but I give mostly because I know the world needs *me* to be transformed – day by day – into a person that sees more people, meets more needs, listens to more stories, has compassion for more suffering, and seeks equitable solutions for more people. And the world needs me to be transformed into a person that allows others to care for me when I am in need, who allows others to be strong for me when I am weak. And *that* kind of transformation, well it just cannot happen without the church, not for me at least. It cannot happen without Amos. Without Isaiah. Without Jesus. Without Family Promise. Without Soul 2 Soul Sisters. Without Interfaith Alliance of Colorado. Without YOU.

My while my own thoughts are nice at times, it's *your* thoughts, and the thoughts in this text (point to Bible) that truly transform me.

Trust this: when we worship together, it is not just for the sake of singing to God. And when we offer our pledges and offerings, it's just for the sake of supporting ourselves. Because when we worship we are

remembering and re-imagining the GOOD that we are working for and that we are called to bring about – the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. And when we *give* to this church – we are saying in a very actionable, tangible way that we need this place to keep reminding us of the justice and righteousness we are to embody and bring about each and every day through more and more relationships.

So may the Lord keep roaring. May the prophets keep speaking. And may we the people keep giving. May we keep giving up what we don't need that weighs us down or keeps us juggling...and may we keep giving towards that which allows the stream of justice and righteousness to flow on and on and on.

May we trust that what we give today is a beginning, that will allow God to continue to transform us for our tomorrows.

The Abundance of the Table is always for All. For you. For me. And for the ones we have yet to see.

Amen.