

Thou Shalt Not Other
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Amos 8:4-10

4 Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land,
5 saying, “When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?”— skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales,
6 buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.
7 The LORD has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done.
8 “Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt.
9 “In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.
10 I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.

“Strange and Foolish Walls” by Rev. A. Powell Davies

The years of all of us are short, our lives precarious. Our days and nights go hurrying on and there is scarcely time to do the little that we might.

Yet we find time for bitterness, for petty treason and evasion.

What can we do to stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness?

Here we are – all of us – all upon this planet, bound together in a common destiny, living our lives between the briefness of daylight and the dark. Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life, how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?

How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!

Sermon

In about the year 750 before the Common Era, so almost 2,800 years ago, a man we know as Amos, a simple shepherd living in the village of Tekoa in the hills of Palestine, felt himself called by God to denounce the grave injustices of his time.

So this is what he did, placing himself as one of the earliest of those who came to be known as the Hebrew prophets.

Now, what is a prophet in this context? Not someone who predicts the future. Rather, someone who reads the signs of the times, sees the injustices and greed of the times, and who names the consequences, the devastations, that will come to pass if things keep on in the same way, if people do not change their ways.

As for Amos, his prophecies come to us collected in written form in a fairly short book of nine chapters – just about ten pages in my Bible.

Amos begins by asserting that he is speaking in the name of the Lord:

The Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.

Thus says the Lord:
For three transgressions of Damascus,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...

He then proceeds in the course of the first chapter and a half to excoriate the neighbors of Israel for their various transgressions, largely what we would today call war crimes: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, Judah.

One can well imagine Amos's Israelite listeners at this point cheering him on: Right on Amos, give it to those terrible people of Edom and Moab, those evil Ammonites, those neighbors of ours who have done us wrong – no punishment is too extreme for them.

Ah... but then... his audience warmed up as we might put it... at chapter 2, verse 6, using the same vivid and vituperative language, Amos proclaims:

Thus says the Lord:
For three transgressions of *Israel*,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;

What? Wait a minute, Amos's listeners may have wondered. Did we hear that right? Us too?

Indeed. And this time it is not for such things as war crimes. Amos goes on, in language we heard echoed a moment ago in the reading from chapter 8:

...because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals –
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.

So for Israel it is not for what we might call war crimes, but for crimes of injustice to the poor and afflicted, and behavior contrary to acceptable moral standards, for which they are being brought to account.

Amos's listeners at this point?

Again we can imagine: What? Us? Wrong? Evil? Unjust? As bad as those terrible neighbors of ours, those... others?

How can that possibly be?

Well, about eight hundred years later another prophet/preacher/teacher emerged from a small town in the same part of the world. He said:

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

Yes, so easy, all too easy, to point the finger at some "other" person or whole category of people.

We of course still do it, almost 2,800 years after Amos, 2,000 years after Jesus.

We are doing it in spades these days. I hardly need offer the list of people and groups who have been demonized as somehow "other" (other than normal, other than American) during the presidential campaign and to the present moment: immigrants, refugees, Muslims, transgender people...

And then... channeling the spirit of Amos: How many of us are at least a little guilty too, guilty of in one way or another dismissing or demeaning or even demonizing those who think differently from us (whomever we feel the "us" is) or have different political affiliations or voted for a different candidate.

Or this, as a few of us discussed in our Sacred Texts group a couple of weeks ago: How many of us have rolled up our windows and locked our car doors at one of those

intersections where poor souls – our brothers and sisters – are holding out their hats or baskets or hands asking for a little help?

What are we to do? How are we, for starters, to lift up and protect the rights of those who are in fact afraid and genuinely threatened: immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Jews, transgender people, African Americans... without at the same time falling into the spiritual trap of considering as “other” those with whom we differ politically?

First steps are actually not so hard; and they are steps I expect many or most of us have already been striving towards.

Really open our hearts to begin with. Just for example:

Allow our hearts to be touched, or broken, as we read of a mother deported and separated from her children after decades living in this country.

Allow our hearts to be touched, or broken, as we read of the violence from which a refugee family from Syria has escaped, leaving behind a dozen relatives who will never take another breath.

Allow our hearts to be touched, or broken, when we read that 40% of transgender youth have attempted suicide at least once.

At the same time educate ourselves:

Learning that the immigrant community, including undocumented immigrants, actually has a lower crime rate than the general population.

Learning of the many ways that immigrants, including the undocumented, contribute to our economy.

Learning that the vetting for refugees is already “extreme.”

So we begin to suspect, if we didn’t already know, that far better than what amounts to mass deportation, disrupting lives and the economy, separating families, would be immigration reform that addresses the actual realities of immigration, not the myths and stereotypes.

And – more education: learning, as we’ve done in classes here at Old Ship, that Islam is a diverse faith, which embraces very much the same moral standards as every faith, and that the vast majority of Muslims simply wish to live their faith and their lives in peace with everyone else.

And – more education: learning that human sexuality is far more complex than two check-boxes, and that there is no threat to those of us who identify with the biological gender of our birth from those who don’t.

All of which, opening our hearts, educating ourselves, can help us more deeply to embrace as “one of us” each of those who some, including political leaders, are treating as “other,” as different, as not worthy of the same rights and privileges as everyone else; can inspire us to stand up for and speak out on behalf of those being treated as “other” – and can inspire us to tell our political leaders to stand up for and speak out on behalf of those being treated as “other.”

And then... as for not making into an “other” those with whom we disagree? Well, think of disagreements you have with people you love, with your dear friends. Don’t we know (most of the time) how to disagree without, as we say, being disagreeable? Don’t we know how to hold our opinion firmly in relation to a loved one, speaking up for what we feel is right in some situation, without accusing our loved one or friend of being evil? “Other”? And listening, trying to understand?

I hope the answer is yes.

Then, all we have to do (I know, easier said than done) is apply what we already know to the wider political and social environments in which we live.

My colleague Rev. Meg Barnhouse, writing in the current issue of the “UU World”, highlights our third UU Principle in this regard, the one that says we covenant to “affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” And Meg says she would like to add “and in our homes” – and we could also add “and in our communities and nation and world.”

Then she makes quite clear what she means by acceptance. It is about “acceptance of the *people* who have different ideas from ours” – which “does not mean or even imply acceptance of all of their ideas, because some ideas are destructive and lead to injustice.”

I think this is all pretty clear, isn’t it. Not to say that it is easy, because it is all too easy – and these days some of us may be falling into the trap many times each day! – to say things that are dismissive not just of the ideas and actions of those with whom we disagree, but of the people too. The trap of “othering.”

So comfortable, to think of oneself on the side of all that is good and just holy... not like those other people.

And all the easier as we more and more “self-segregate” geographically and digitally by race, religion, income, political party, and so on... making it all the easier to point the finger outward.

All this is of course an ancient and enduring challenge. Jesus knew it when he reminded us to be careful with our judging of others, careful about noting the speck in someone else’s eyes when we don’t even see the log in our own.

So he told us instead, not only to love our neighbors as ourselves, but even to love our enemies – which (as Meg Barnhouse echoed) can’t possibly mean also to condone everything your “neighbor” or your “enemy” does. But we can still hold them in our hearts.

And Jesus, as we know, taught not only with words but by example, the example of who he hung out with, who he ministered to, who he lifted up – the poor, the outcasts – as at least every bit as worthy as those already exalted by society and political structures.

The Buddha, in his way, did the same, offering his teaching to all, regardless of caste – to the poorest of the poor as well as to princes and kings.

In our time likewise Gandhi, lifting up as “children of God” the literal outcasts of Indian society, even as he negotiated respectfully with the British overlords.

Well then... maybe we just need American leaders of the same character, lifting up this enduring message of genuine unity and inclusion and, yes, love.

But the fact is... we have no time to wait for such leaders.

There is only us.

May we rise to this moment of history, rise as the spirit of compassion, understanding, and love bids us rise.

Let me conclude by returning to our friend, the wild man from Tekoa, Amos.

You see, what was true for ancient Israel is true for us, Americans, today. We can keep on as we have been keeping on lately, trampling the rights of the poor and those who are different from some imagined norm, and at the same time barely talking to each other. Or we can change our ways.

If we do, if we break this habit of “othering” and really practice principles enshrined, for example, in our Constitution... then might arrive the sort of restoration that Amos promises to Israel at the end of his little book – (perhaps, scholars say, a later addition to the book, but no less inspiring for that as a call to a better and possible future):

The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
The mountain shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they will never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

May it be so for us, for all of us, for all beings.

And may we, each and all, help it to be so.