

**PENTECOST VIII, 2018**  
**Amos 7.7-15**

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Our Old Testament reading for today is a story from the book of the prophet Amos. This man who lived over 700 years before Jesus has had a great influence in the history of the Church and our country. Let us consider Amos' work and teaching, and his importance for our life as the people of God.

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Amos lived in a time in the history of Israel in which the country was divided into two kingdoms, the North and the South. Amos was from the southern kingdom, Judah. He lived in Tekoa, a small town. He was a peasant farmer. He worked tending sheep, which was not a job in those days that made any list of "Where the Best Jobs Are Now." He also was a dresser of sycamore trees, whatever that is, or was. In all probability, he was just like most of us here today, going about his business, trying to get through life, pay the bills, raise the kids, making ends meet.

Then everything changed. Amos received a powerful call from the Lord to be a prophet. Specifically, he was to leave his home and work and go to the northern kingdom and speak God's Word there. This must have filled Amos with wonder and, most of all, fear. He was not a learned man. He had not gone to "prophecy school" to study to become a prophet. He did not have a degree. He was not ordained for this office. He was not a member of the PPG: "Professional Prophets Guild." And God was sending him up north, of all places. How would they receive him?

We see here the way God works. God chooses whom He will to do His work. Moreover, please note: Amos was not one of the clergy. He was one of you people. The lesson in this is that you in your setting in life are just as much called to the service of God as is a pastor. You are baptized. You have been anointed with the Spirit of the Lord. You are called to witness to the truth of God and speak His Word in your own place in life just as much as any pastor is in the office of ordained ministry.

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We should also reflect just a minute on what is a prophet and prophecy. The word "prophecy" is often confused with fortune-telling, predicting the future, or specifically predicting the coming of Jesus. But the main concern of the Old Testament prophets was not the future, but the present. They judged the present time in the light of God's teaching. The prophets reminded the Jews that they were the covenant people of God and the expectations God had of them because of the covenant He had made with them. If the prophets foresaw events in the future, it was because they knew the connection between spiritual and moral health in the present and its consequences for the future.

Let me put it this way: It is the tendency of every system -- a family, a church, a business, a nation -- to close in on itself and become stuck in "the way we do things around here." Such systems can be so stuck in their established patterns of thinking and acting that they are closed to the Holy Spirit. The people literally cannot hear the Word of the Lord anymore. Prophets are people whom God sends to open up the system once more, so that people can be open to God's power and freed for the future God intends for them. The prophet's job is to challenge what everyone knows for sure so that people once again can hear the Word of the Lord. Prophets, it seems to me, are people who in one way or another ask a very simple question: What does God think about what's going on here?

So, for example, when I was growing up, I was taught America was the land of the free and the home of the brave, with liberty and justice for all. But along came Martin Luther King, who challenged the system. He recalled the moral and spiritual foundations of this country and challenged America by saying, "How can you call this the land of freedom, where all are created equal, when a whole race of people is systematically excluded from participating in its public life and sharing its benefits? He often quoted Amos, especially the words: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (5.24).

Of course, King was not popular. Which is another feature of prophets: they usually are not popular, until after they die. Then people admire them for their courage and name holidays after them. But in their lifetimes prophets usually are not liked. Some are actually hated. It is not surprising; if you

dare to challenge the way things are, what everyone assumes to be right and true and the way things work, don't expect people to send you champagne and roses. Be prepared to duck. Or, as one person said, "No one ever went from oppression to freedom while their oppressors cheered them on."

We see this in the reading today. Amaziah, the high priest, representative of the religious establishment, tells Amos to go home. "If you want to preach doom and gloom," he said, "do it in your home country. You are not welcome here." Amaziah and his colleagues had a vested interest in keeping the status quo, telling people only what they wanted to hear, not what God was saying to them. But Amos was about truth, not popularity. Just because everyone said something was right, did not make it right.

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So, what were the specifics of Amos' teaching, that made him so unpopular? What can we, the people of God today, learn from him?

First: the faith of God's people must express itself in concern for the poor, for the underdog, for the suffering, for those at the bottom of the social ladder. Amos insisted that the measure of a nation or any organization or any Christian is how it treats its poor, its weakest and most vulnerable members.

Amos was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel. At this time the North was enjoying a period of national prosperity and security. But, where everyone else saw prosperity and peace, Amos saw idolatry and complacency. Where the elite of the society invoked God's promises as a guarantee of their wealth and happiness, Amos exposed their hypocrisy. He showed how their prosperity was built on the backs of the poor, exploiting them and using the law to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

The long history of concern for social, political, and economic justice in Western Civilization has its roots in the teaching of Amos. He and other prophets introduced into history the idea that a nation is accountable to standards of justice that transcend national or personal self-interest.

It is the work of the Church today to remind nations of God's standards of justice, of concern for

the poor and care for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. How this is done is a matter of specific government policies and programs. About these the Church has no special expertise. But the Church does have a calling to speak God's Word of justice and to side for the weak and the poor and all those who have none to speak for them.

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The second element in Amos' teaching was insistence on genuine and true worship. Amos' complaint was not that the people had too little religion, but that they had too much of it. They had feast days and religious spectacles galore. But this religion was a false front, hiding the moral and spiritual corruption within. Their faith was a mile wide and an inch deep. Amos showed that religion can be a smokescreen to hide our sins and avoid serving the Lord. Amos showed that religion can be the enemy of faith, rather than a true expression of it.

I wonder what Amos would say about the character of American religion today. So much of American religion has bought into the success-ethic of our culture, measuring success in worldly terms rather than in faithfulness to what God expects of us. What would Amos make of a culture in which worship has become just another form of entertainment, where the guiding principle has become "being relevant" to people? I think Amos would not ask if the Church is relevant to people, but are people and the Church relevant to God and His purposes?

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The last feature Amos gives us is the example of moral and public courage. We see in this text that Amos' message was not welcome in northern Israel. His message challenged the established system. He was told to pack up and go home, or else.

But Amos stood his ground. He defined who he was and what God wanted him to do. He did not shrink from publicly speaking the truth of God. Amos would not sacrifice commitment to the truth for the sake of personal or national peace. Because he knew, as Jesus said: The truth will set you free.

May we have this same commitment in our lives, both personal and public. Amen.