

Amos 5:18-24  
I John 2:29-3:7

Third Sunday in Lent, March 4, 2018  
The Rev. Dr. Betsey Crimmins

Heroes of the Faith: Amos and the Problem of Justice

Recently I ran across a list called “Funny Yard Signs.” Here are some of them:

“We are too broke to buy anything. We know who we are voting for. We have found Jesus. Seriously unless you are selling thin mints, please go away!”

“Is it a yard sale or a really inexpensive department store? Come and see for yourself!” (Maybe we can use that one for the Rummage Sale)

“No smoking. If we see you smoking, we will assume you are on fire and will dredge you with water.”

Reward (photo of black cat)

Black manx, white markings on belly, no tail, 6 years old. Red collar and tags. Overweight. Mews all day/night demanding attention. Won't stay off the countertops. Eats directly from unattended plates. Knocks over glasses, vases, bottles. Various ailments. Doesn't do tricks or anything of interest. Will give this cat to whoever returns my car keys lost here last Thursday. Phone #” (with an offer like that, I'm thinking the person never got their keys back.)

On tread mill by the curb: “I'm fat and lazy – you still have a chance! Free!”

“Take my ex's stuff garage sale! It's all gotta go! Just like him!”

Now in that last one, I detect a note of anger ... and perhaps revenge ... and perhaps trying to get even about something ...

... which leads us to the topic for today – justice.

Justice is rather tricky. On the one hand when you read Proverbs 21:3, where it says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice,” you realize that justice and it's twin, righteousness are more important to God than all the pious words and prayers and good intentions we can pour out. But on the other hand, we humans like it when the scales of justice end up being tipped in our favor. Too easily we slip into a double standard, saying things like, “Gee the cops really should pull over the person going 67mph in a 55 mph zone” but we feel that it's a great injustice when the person speeding that is pulled over is us.

Yes, we know that justice doesn't mean just us. And righteousness doesn't mean being zealous (and therefore somewhat arrogant) in a pursuit of righteousness. And we know that it's easy to talk about justice and righteousness but the problem is, it is not easy to do and to be.

Enter Amos ... what a character! Amos was known as the troubler from Tekoa. He was a sheep herder and a fig picker. He marched up to the capital and confronted the king one day. At a time of unprecedented prosperity and unlimited power in Israel, Amos came pleading for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. His message didn't go over very well.

I wonder what Amos would have said had he been a preacher and prophet today. I can begin to imagine. Should the rich be able to get a personal loan for 6% while the poor pay 20 to 30%? Studies show that black pre-school children are punished more frequently and harshly for misbehaving than their white counterparts. ([www.quora.com/what-are-some-social-injustices-in-today-s-society](http://www.quora.com/what-are-some-social-injustices-in-today-s-society)) Is that fair? Is that justice at work and righteousness in relationships? Mr. or Ms. Anonymous has noted that the greatest injustice is realizing that something needs to be done yet people just say what the problem is and don't try to fix it or help causes that fight against the said injustice. Honestly, when I read that comment I thought to myself, "I wonder how much I resemble that comment?" How about you?

We get it: that if you drive your car through my house, I will expect you to cover damages. That's justice. If you steal from the church, we are going to take you to court. If you are going 50 mph in a school zone when school is in session, you can expect a speeding ticket – a big one – and maybe so many points that you lose your license.

However, Amos was concerned about another kind of justice – the justice of opportunity. I've already mentioned it in terms of interest rates and the insidious racism that simmers everywhere in our society. Amos would ask why are wheat prices for the poor different than wheat prices for the rich? Why is a bushel of grain from the poor weighed on different scales than a bushel of grain for the rich? How dare you rich folk lounge on your ivory furniture while poor people don't even have a shack to live in? (Amos 5:11)

What is justice? Biblically speaking, what needs to be said first is that justice is rooted in the very nature of God (Isaiah 40:11) God seeks to make the objects of his holy love whole. Biblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the whole universe whole and in a state of well-being (shalom) by upholding both goodness and impartiality. According to James, the kind of religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is when we are looking after the widows, the orphans and others in their distress, and when we are keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world (James 1:27) Proverbs is pretty clear: "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. (Proverbs 29:7) Social justice and personal morality and righteousness go hand in hand.

And what is righteousness? It is standing right with God and others. It is living life in a way that is pleasing to God. Again, it is one of the chief attributes of God. Often in Scriptures, God's righteousness is an expression of God's salvation,

truth, justice and mercy. As to us human beings being righteous, there is a sense that because of our human nature, it is very hard, if not impossible for us to be righteous all of the time. I suppose that led John Wesley to say that righteousness is a gracious gift from God which enables Christian disciples to strive for holiness.

For me the bottom line is this: Life may not be fair, but we can be fair. We can and should treat others the way human beings deserve to be treated because every person is a creation of God. The church therefore is not a bunch of people with emotional packed services that leave everyone feeling good and as if they've gotten their money's worth. The church is a community of believers and Christ followers where there is a constant striving to be of service to others out of sincere love and deep faith. Church isn't just something that you go to (it isn't just a noun); it is something that you live, everywhere and in every moment (it is also a verb).

To be righteous is to love one another, even our enemies. It is to care for the least of these as well as the world our home. When we are living justly, being righteous, and doing God's work, we are getting in the middle of what God is already doing. As someone once said, "We don't need God to bless our plans. We need to become a blessing to God's plans." Someone else said (a good thought to think about on a communion Sunday) that we were made for loving, just and righteous communion with God and one another, not for consumption. That leads me to ask: why do we think we need more money, more food, newer and better cars, bigger homes, when what we all need is more love and more God, who is love?

So if you wonder why as a church we are constantly working on being the hands and feet of Christ in the world, it is because such justice and righteousness is at the heart of our relationship with God. If you wonder why we are concerned about the social issues and inequalities of our times, it is because such justice and righteousness is at the heart of our relationship with God.

I leave you with a piece that I recently found:

God won't ask what kind of car you drove but will ask how many people you drove who didn't have transportation.

God won't ask the square footage of your house, but will ask how many people you welcomed into your home.

God's won't ask about the fancy clothes you had in your closet, but will ask how many of those clothes helped the needy.

God won't ask about your social status, but will ask what kind of class you displayed.

God won't ask how many material possessions you had, but will ask if they dictated your life.

God won't ask what your highest salary was, but will ask if you compromised your character to obtain that salary.

God won't ask how much overtime you worked but will ask if you worked overtime for your family and loved ones and for the least of these.

God won't ask how many promotions you received, but will ask how you promoted others.

God will ask how you have done justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with him.