



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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MAJORING IN THE MINORS: AMOS

Let Justice Roll Down

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Scripture: Amos 5:14-15 & 21-24; Romans 12:9-13

AMOS — THE MAN

When we hear, “*He’s a man of God*”, the images that most often come to mind are of some famous evangelist / pastor or missionary / bishop or some influential church leader. In other words, professionals / Xn. workers / those who preach & teach the Word as a vocation.

Surely AMOS was a man of God—a person whose life was devoted to serving the Lord and whose lifestyle reflected this devotion—but he was a “*layperson*”. Herding sheep and tending sycamore fig trees in the Judean countryside were his thing. Amos was not a “preacher’s kid” / not the son of prophet. As a simple shepherd / farm worker, he could have stayed in Tekoa where he was from—rugged sheep country in Judah = 10 miles from Jerusalem—doing his job / providing for his family / worshipping God.

But somewhere out in the fields as he worked, God gave Amos a vision of the future and told him to take his message across the border into the n. kingdom Israel. By his own testimony in ch.7:15, Amos says: “*The Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’*”

[I admire him for his obedience to the call of God. Without any formal education or preparation, he was simply ready & willing to go. I wonder, are we???

Now when Amos went, he crossed not only a geographical divide (from *s. kingdom of Judah* to *n. kingdom of Israel*), but he also crossed an economic / cultural divide. Israel at this time was at the height of its power with a prosperous economy. But the nation was spiritually corrupt. People were living beneath a pious veneer of religion, worshipping idols and oppressing the poor.

Amos, though a simple shepherd from the south, became a pretty fiery / fearless / straightforward spokesman for the Lord—calling out all the nations around Israel (including his homeland, Judah) for rejecting God and harming His people Israel.

Ø Repeatedly he says in the first two chapters: “*For three sins. . . even for four*” which means these nations had sinned again & again / persistently & chronically. You can almost hear the people of Israel shouting: “*Yes! Amen! You tell ‘em, Amos!*”

Ø Until all of a sudden, he begins talking about *them*. And for the next four chapters, he pronounces God’s judgment on *their* complacency / *their* oppression of the poor / *their* superficial religion.

It's a good reminder that WE need to listen and not just point fingers. God is no respecter of persons. Just because you're a child of God doesn't mean He will pass you or me by when something needs to be changed / corrected in our life. If anything, He may be a little stricter with those of us who claim to belong to Him.

AMOS — THE MESSAGE

Two weeks ago, we focused on HOSEA, whose concern was for the moral & religious revival.

Today, we focus on AMOS, whose concern is for economic & social justice.

You see, Israel was enjoying a period of peace & prosperity. As the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. . .and there was virtually no middle class left. People were grabbing for all they could get and ignoring the needs of their less-fortunate fellow man. Corruption was on the rise, and justice & compassion on the decline:

- Ø Heavier & heavier taxes were being laid on workers.
- Ø The wealthy were grabbing up all the good land à forcing out the small farmers.
- Ø Many of the poor + their families were being forced to sell themselves as “bond-servants” (on their own land!).
- Ø Back in town, merchants also were corrupt. Weights & measures couldn't be trusted. You might pay for a pound and get a half-pound.
- Ø The justice system was sluggish. Rather than protecting or defending the poor, judges took bribes from the rich (thereby joining the oppressors).
- Ø The rich showed no sense of responsibility or compassionate concern toward the poor. Their heartlessness is expressed in one angry charge hurled by Amos in ch. 2:6 “*They sell the needy for a pair of sandals.*”

And so, God sent AMOS!

The God of Amos / the God of our O.T. & N.T. is committed to compassion and cares deeply about the sufferings of any of His people (esp. the poor). And so he says in ch. 5:21-24:

²¹ *"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.*

²² *Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice peace offerings, I will have no regard for them.*

²³ *Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

²⁴ *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

That line—LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN—made *famous* by Amos:

- Ø Picked up by M. L. KING. . .title of one of his famous essays (detailing the state of race relations in the 60's). . .became the watchword of the Civil Rights Movement.
- Ø Title of a book by reformer JOHN PERKINS, who in the 60's sought to empower the black community and was nearly beaten to death. He fought back with love and non-violence. I've heard him speak; he's one of my heroes for all he has done to bring blacks & whites together and promote economic development.

The line says “*Let JUSTICE (~ JUDGMENT) roll down*”. What is justice? Justice is fairness.

It says everybody deserves to be treated fairly. . .everybody deserves a shot at having:

- Ø The basic necessities of life (e.g.: food / clothing / shelter)
- Ø A good education
- Ø An opportunity to work / to own property
- Ø Equal treatment in the marketplace (e.g.: goods & services, health care, et.al.)

~ Things that we middle-classes take for granted! ~

That doesn't always happen. Life isn't always fair. None of us gets everything we think we deserve. That's why we often say: “*Life may be tough, but God is good. . .all the time.*”

Nevertheless, Amos is saying we need to work toward justice in society. That's why a book like this—sometimes pretty angry in tone—could show up in the Canon of Scripture.

The N.T. emphasis on personal relationship with God and individual salvation does not alter God's concern for justice and holiness in a society. God cares deeply about the poor and how they suffer. We need to care about what God cares about.

One of our CORE VALUES in the Wesleyan tradition is “balanced Christianity”:

- Ø Balanced between “*worship*” and “*service*”
- Ø Balanced between “*personal*” and “*corporate*”

I believe Amos is directing our attention toward “*CORPORATE ACTS OF JUSTICE*”.

There are two approaches to that.

A. RESCUE life by life

I have worked in the inner-city, at the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries. Their motto was “*rescuing one life at a time*”.

I have a good friend who lives and ministers in Southeast Detroit among the Hispanic population. He and some neighbors he's organized have gone toe-to-toe with one of the factories in the area over mindless pollution.

Some are called to cross cultural boundaries to go into a community and make a difference. Should we all sell out and move into the city? NO! That would cause a lot of commotion as we wouldn't be accepted due to our white, middle-class values.

Ø Yet we have a responsibility to support others who do (i.e.: MISSIONARIES).

Ø And to engage in MISSION WORK ourselves (e.g.: IHN / Redbird / Habitat / Haiti / Memphis).

But, if I am reading Amos correctly, we are not just called to pull (rescue) people out of bad situations. We are also called to impact, to change structures that create an unjust society. So that leads to the second approach.

B. CHANGE a whole system

How do we do that? I'm just one person; as a church, we make up a small % of the population.

How might we [DUMC] do justice?

FIRST> We've got to deal with *complacency*. With all the comfort and luxury we enjoy comes self-sufficiency and a false sense of security. It's an automatic by-product. We've got to put that on the altar. Everybody in Amos' day was optimistic; business was booming; people were happy—all, that is, except the poor & oppressed. We can't afford to forget those who are hurting.

It has been said that if every church in the land were to adopt a needy family, poverty would be eliminated in less than a generation.

One of our small groups has been toying with the idea of adopting a family from IHN and using their skills to help that family assume responsible home ownership.

SECOND> Consider the ways we oppress the poor. Maybe we refuse to participate in the LOTTO. Watching what we participate in and boycotting things that hurt people is certainly one way of *doing justice*.

THIRD> We must go beyond "sparing a little change" for the beggar on the street (good as that might be). . .and act compassionately to stop injustice and help care for those in need.

Any business owners here? Or people in supervisory capacities? Or corporate managers? How about addressing the hiring policies so that the poor and the disabled are given a chance?

How employers treat employees is incredibly important. Do we give adequate time off? Good benefits? Rewards for a job well done? Or do we short-change employees? Talk down to them?

How employees treat their employers is equally important. Do we give bosses due respect (behind their back as well as to their faces)? Do we give our all, or do we cut corners? Steal time or materials? Get lazy in the way we carry out our job?

Let justice roll through all our dealings with people. . .let it effect all the structures of our lives.

You say, *“I can’t change the world! I can’t change the way things are where I live or work.”* Oh, but you can make more of an impact than you might think!

Everybody impacts “a” system, or maybe “several” systems. We’re all part of:

- Ø A family, a neighborhood, a workplace, a company, a corporation, a classroom;
- Ø A political party (where we can influence through our “vote”);
- Ø A political, social, or community action group.

We can all be part of something that makes for better-fairer-more caring treatment of those who are hurting or suffering. We can all hear—and respond—to the cries of the poor, of abused/neglected children, of AIDS-afflicted, of the elderly, of minorities.

Our church can make a difference too. As a “regional equipping center”, we do more than provide space for groups that need a place to meet. We are a force for righteousness in the community. Collectively, we bear witness to the life-changing, transforming power of Christ.

Let justice roll down! Let compassion & concern rule in our hearts!

Let it lead you to be involved in rescuing a life OR impacting a system.

That’s what Amos is calling for. It all comes down to this (still in chapter 5):

*¹⁴ Seek good, not evil, that you may live.
Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.*

¹⁵ Hate evil, love good; maintain justice. . .

There’s a parallel passage in the New Testament. It’s found in Romans 12:9-13:

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

CONCLUSION

Let me ask you this morning. . .

- Ø Have you grown complacent?
- Ø Have other concerns taken God’s place in your life?
- Ø Do you ignore those in need or oppress the poor?

Picture yourself as Amos, faithfully doing what God calls you to do. You too can be God’s person. Listen for His clear call and do what He says—wherever it leads.

SOME ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE ROMANS 12 PASSAGE

Let Love Be Sincere

God calls us to real and sincere love that goes far beyond pretense and politeness. Sincere love requires concentration and effort. It means helping other become better people. It demands our time, our money, our personal involvement. Are you looking for people who need your love? Are you looking for ways you and your fellow believers can love our community for Christ?

Honor One Another

We tend to honor others because of something they have accomplished. . .or because they are persons of stature. . .or have some authority over us. How about honoring people simply because they have been made in the image of God. . .because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. . . and because they have a unique contribution to make to His church?

Practice Hospitality

True Christ-centered hospitality centers on the guests, not the host. Their needs—whether for a place to stay, nourishing food, a listening ear, or acceptance—are the primary concern. Hospitality can happen in a messy home. It can happen around a dinner table where the main dish is canned soup. Don't hesitate to offer hospitality just because you are too tired, too busy, or not wealthy enough to entertain.