

23 Pentecost, Proper 27, Yr. A

November 12, 2017

Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

I'd like to look at the three readings for today from the point of view of what we pay attention to. Because, by definition, we give our attention to that which we think is important. In the Episcopal Church, we distinguish between those things that we deem ESSENTIAL and everything else, which is named *adiaphora*- non-essential, or even peripheral. So we should be paying attention to that which is essential, not using up our energy for non-essentials.

This business of paying attention has become BIG business. In a recent issue of *The Economist*, there was an article outlining how those things we pay attention to, using the various forms of social media, are being gathered and sold to advertisers. Whole armies of people are being employed to capture and manipulate our attention. It's estimated that a smart phone user touches his or her phone an average of 2600 times per day. As you might imagine, this is coming at a cost to relationships. Still, our attention has become big business.

What we pay attention to is the subject of today's readings. Amos, an 8th century prophet, coming into Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah, is lamenting the fact that, in the present good times, people are no longer paying attention to what matters. He sees the people disregarding, even flaunting, the covenant demands for TRUE worship, which is seen in the justice and righteousness that should characterize a covenant society. And he warns them that the coming Day of the Lord will be a time of reckoning, not the celebration they are anticipating. Amos isn't against worship, only that kind of empty worship, that going-through-the-motions kind of ritual that doesn't result in changed lives. It's been said that worship and prayer give us the insight and courage to do justice, to engage society, and then that engagement sends us back to worship to renew our vision and our strength. There's a cycle of radical engagement in the world that is so intense that we must follow it with radical withdrawal to prayer and that prayer sends us back into the world. Back and forth. But what's also said is that most of us live, neither in that place of radical prayer, nor in radical engagement, but somewhere in the lukewarm middle.

Talk of Old Testament justice sometimes goes over our heads because we have a rather different concept today. And ours is pretty pallid by comparison. We represent justice by a blindfolded figure holding scales, uninvolved and impartial. We think in terms of criminality or litigation. We use justice in criminal law to punish and in civil law to restore people to the condition they enjoyed before the wrong was done. What people DESERVE looms large in our system of justice. But justice, in the Old Testament and in the New, goes way beyond that – it's not impartial; in fact it's biased in favor of the poor and powerless - it wants to level the playing field. It doesn't address what people deserve, but, instead, what they NEED. It's not about contracts or torts, but about human dignity and what has to happen to allow each person to achieve that dignity. Even stronger, justice is identified with God. It's seen as the foundation of God's throne, the ground of his majesty and it's by justice that the holy God shows himself to be holy. It's closely tied to *shalom*, a world of peace, wholeness, harmony and security. It's a world where all is in accord with God's original vision. And because of that, justice will

ultimately prevail. In the Amos reading: Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream. It's an image of mighty waters sweeping everything before them that would prevent or distort God's kingdom. One wouldn't want to be standing in the way.

But Amos' listeners aren't paying attention - instead they are distracting themselves with luxuries and entertainment. They're missing the connection between worship and life.

Paul is confronting a different problem in his letter to the Thessalonians (which is, by the way, the oldest writing in the New Testament). Here the problem is that the focus of attention, which should be on the death and resurrection of Christ, is instead on the timing of his second coming. They expect it to be soon and are concerned that those of their community who have died while waiting will somehow miss out. Jesus was raised from the dead, they're saying, but that won't mean anything unless we're on hand to greet him when he returns. Hold on, says Paul, you've got the wrong end of the stick; you're focusing your attention in the wrong place. The resurrection is not some isolated one-time event, like a single, solitary rabbit God pulls out of a hat to show us that Jesus is the Christ – no it's a COSMIC event that defeats the power of death for all of us and for all creation. But in explaining this to the Thessalonians, Paul inadvertently uses a phrase... "then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds..." that will be picked up and exploited by a much later generation of writers. You will note that the word "rapture" doesn't appear here. But that's what this purports to describe. The whole theology of the rapture is not Biblical, but was a speculation of John Nelson Darby who came up with something called premillennial dispensationalism. He was from England, but found fertile soil for his teaching in the U.S. He divided human history into 7 sections, which he called dispensations. Between now and the final dispensation, there will be what he calls great tribulations, but God's chosen won't have to suffer through them, the rapture will remove them from all that messiness. You'll perhaps recognize that this was taken up by two fellows who wrote an immensely popular and immensely lucrative series of books, The Left Behind series, which ostensibly gave comfort to those who'd be whisked away and put the fear of God into those who might find themselves left behind. Biblical or not, these books struck a chord with a lot of people whose attention was focused not on loving their neighbor, or helping to bring about the kingdom, but on their own escape from the coming disaster.

And then there's the Matthew reading. Elsewhere Matthew says we shouldn't be worried about when the end would come. Perhaps he knew that people would get preoccupied and forget any care about loving their neighbors in favor of their own safety. But still – to these communities that had expected Jesus' imminent return, something had to be said to offer encouragement, to help people stay focused. So Matthew tells three parables about delay and waiting. This particular parable doesn't appear to be anyone's favorite, at least among commentators. They go off in any number of directions, including wondering why the wise bridesmaids weren't willing to share or why the foolish bridesmaids didn't just go along with the party because, after all, the way was only being lit by five lamps anyway, so what difference would it make, and, finally, their major function was to greet the bridegroom and they could still have done that with or without oil. But perhaps, in spite of all this quibbles, all Matthew was trying to say was that we needed to be ready. Because there will come a time for each of us when we will have run out of time – so rather than thinking we have all the time in the world, maybe we should go ahead and make

that decision, or write that letter, or attempt that reconciliation. So, one way of looking at this parable is that all the bridesmaids were focused on the wrong thing.

And, finally a bit about the trip and about visiting Wittenberg and so about Martin Luther. Here are a couple of words about attention. The first is, as you've probably heard, that all these hundreds of years, everyone had their attention focused on Martin nailing his 95 theses to the church door. Turns out it didn't happen, although when someone wanted to debate something, that was often what was done. But here, too, in the events leading up to the Reformation, one thing at least can be said, and that was that attention was focused in the wrong place and that Luther wanted to do something about that. You may know that most of his theses had to do with the practice of selling indulgences. The church was in a bad way financially. It had been fighting with the Turks at Vienna, but it had also started an ambitious building program on St. Peter's in Rome. Where to get the money? Someone came up with the idea of selling indulgences – a sort of get-out-of-jail-free card. The idea was that a person could buy an indulgence which, depending on the cost, could spare you some time in purgatory. At one point, the church changed its mind and canceled the forgiveness powers of already purchased indulgences for the next eight years. If you wanted that period covered, you had to buy a new indulgence. Realizing that would be hard on folks, the church declared that these purchasers didn't have to make a confession or even exhibit contrition. They just had to hand over the money. Luther had some serious problems with all this – first of all the biblical question of where purgatory came from in the first place, but equally seriously, there was, perhaps like Amos, a question in Luther's mind about whether this was just an empty transaction, not requiring any kind of life in accord with God's will. For Luther, it was faith that mattered, but any true faith resulted in a transformed life – good works followed true faith.

Luther, like Amos, wanted people to have sincere and deep faith, faith that showed forth in their lives. But often, humans being what we are, people were captured by the easy way, the flashy way, in this case, the painless way of buying an indulgence. Friars selling the indulgences knew how to capture attention – in their case, with a catching amusing jingle that assured the purchaser that the sound of the coin jingling in their coffers was matched by a soul going up to heaven.

Attention, focus, refusing the temptation for the easy way out; instead following in the footsteps of Christ that demand nothing less than lives of love and service. Not flashy, but quietly holy. Amen.