

15 Pentecost, Proper 20, Yr. C  
September 22, 2019  
Amos 8:4-7, 1 Timothy 2L1-7, Luke 16:1-13

At first glance, these scriptures seem to be all over the place. But I wonder if the collect can't function as an ordering device. It advises us to make a distinction between what's passing away and what endures, working for and holding on to those that will endure. We talked last week about being clear about our goal and about that goal being articulated as the Kingdom. That's why we were created, that's where we're headed, and that is what will endure. Not a place, but that state of affairs where God's will is fully in effect, where justice, compassion and love will be what determines everything, which each person is seen as a child of God, a walking around temple, bearing the image and presence of God.

We see that in Paul's letter to Timothy, in which he urges prayers for everyone, including kings and all in high positions, not just to be nice, but so that everyone, including those in leadership positions, will work towards a society in which we may "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." Another way to talk about the kingdom. And, by extension, that sets out a standard by which we are to judge our leaders – are they moving us toward that kind of society? A society where everyone is able to lead a quiet, peaceable life in godliness and dignity?

Keeping that in mind, look at the reading from Amos. He was an early 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet, and he was writing at a time when things looked quite rosy. King Jeroboam had had some military victories and no one had, as yet, figured out that Assyria was going to be the next rising power and the next big problem for the area. So in that time of relative tranquility, people forgot what they were supposed to be about, forgot that they were God's elect, called to lead lives of holiness, called to be a light to the nations. Instead, they chose the passing stuff. Amos castigates them for empty worship, going through the motions, with no tie to ethical behavior, and for spending their time and energy accumulating luxuries and ignoring the fact that injustice was being done in the courts and cheating in the marketplaces. When God looked at the oppression and disregard for the poor and needy, he said, I will make an end of you as a nation and when

you wake up to what you have lost, you will find that my word, my protection, my presence, is gone. You chose what is passing over what endures. In outlining their offenses, Amos is telling the people that in the absence of justice and compassion, the community will disintegrate. More simply put, I have seen a bumper sticker that says, IF YOU WANT PEACE, WORK FOR JUSTICE.

And then there's the Luke passage about the dishonest steward. There's a lot of discussion about this parable and a fair amount of disagreement about what it means. Surely Jesus doesn't mean to tell us to imitate the dishonest steward – to cheat in order to feather our nests. I'd like us to look at that parable more closely and then use it to look at Biblical interpretation more generally. You'll note that the text does not say that he was dishonest. It says that someone accused him of squandering the master's property. So it's possible that he wasn't dishonest at all. In fact, historians of the period tell us that he probably wasn't receiving any salary for his work but was, instead, expected to simply add whatever he could to the master's bill for himself. But, be that as it may, it's clear that he's going to be fired. Recognizing that, he goes to each debtor and writes a new bill, reducing the amount owed pretty substantially. If the historians are correct, then it's possible that he was simply forgiving the amount of his own commission. What he has in mind, of course, is providing some future security for himself, in effect, letting go of what's passing in favor of what's more enduring.

I mentioned earlier that interpretations of this parable are all over the place. People who are looking through the lens of grace see it as a story of radical forgiveness of debt. People whose main concern is evangelism argue that it means that Christians, the children of light, need to be realistic in how they portray the Gospel and that we need to be as urgent in our approach to preaching the gospel as the steward was in securing his future. Some of these interpretations are more convincing than others.

And I'd like to use that idea as a springboard for the whole question of how to read and interpret the Bible. It seems like it should be a straightforward exercise, but that's often not the case. I remember being in Texas and

seeing bumper stickers that read, THE BIBLE SAYS WHAT IT MEANS AND MEANS WHAT IT SAYS. The folks with those bumper stickers presuppose that we KNOW what the Bible says and that we can easily understand it, in spite of the fact that it was written hundreds or thousands of years ago, in different languages and that it reflects cultures very different from our own. Those same people argue that we all we have to do is read the Bible and its meaning will be clear – no interpretation is necessary or even allowable. But that is to miss the point that people have been interpreting the scriptures from the very beginning. The Jewish tradition is one of interpretation. Jesus was in that tradition when he stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and interpreted the reading from Isaiah. And the first Christians were interpreting when they re-read the Hebrew Scriptures in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

There's something attractive about the idea that the meaning of scripture can simply be lifted off the page. You've probably heard the story of the fellow who, in his old age, had lost his teeth, and who questioned his minister about the passage that read that there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "What about those of us without teeth?" was the question. "Teeth will be provided," was the answer.

This wasn't an issue before the Reformation. The Catholic Church, through the papacy and a long tradition of the church's interpretation of the text, was really the only game in town. But the Reformers wanted to get rid of Rome's authority, so they argued that the Bible's meaning was accessible and democratic. If you can read it, you can understand it. There is authority, they said, but it's not in the church. Instead it's in the mind and conscience of the believer. So, in their zeal to get rid of papal authority, they substituted the authority of the literal text. In the same way that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ , the meaning of the Bible was open to the reader. It was, they said, a matter of common sense.

But what we have found is that one can obscure the deeper meaning of the text by paying attention only to the words, or only to some words. The truth the Bible give us is bigger than the text, with the possible exception of the text that gives us the two great commandments. The Bible has an arc of

meaning that transcends the time and place and context of the original writers and a meaning that is also meant to move us beyond our own prejudices and those of our culture. The task of the Bible reader is to move beyond what is particular to a certain time and place of a given writing to what's universally applicable. To figure out what's passing and what's enduring.

There are many examples of how this works but perhaps the best one is slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention apologized for its role in justifying slavery and subsequently maintaining racism in 1995. One wonders what took so long. It took that long because their tradition understood slavery and racial separation to be based on the Bible. What happened by 1995 to change their minds?

You may know that those who defended slavery when all the way back to Genesis and the story of Noah cursing his son, Ham, who was thought to be the originator of the black race. But there were other biblical arguments: the patriarchs had slaves, and neither Jesus nor Paul ever condemned slavery. So, before the Civil War, Southerners argued that they not only had a superior civilization, but that their peculiar institution of slavery was based on a firm biblical foundation and that they had done more to benefit the African race than anyone else. And they could point to support in the Scripture.

Those against slavery couldn't argue from any specific text, they had to argue from a position of moral principle – that humans were made in the image of God and that God loved all people and that we're obliged to love our neighbors as ourselves. We all know that the Civil War was fought over this issue but historians point out that that didn't change hearts and minds on the issue. One writer, in 1869, said this: "Now I would certainly be opposed to the restoration of slavery in this country, but I have undergone no change on the righteousness of slavery, nor can I change until convinced that our Bible is not the book of God." And yet, in 1956, a white man wrote, "Throughout the first 60 years of my life I never questioned but that Peter's confession that God is no respecter of persons in the Book of Acts referred exclusively to the differences among white

Christian persons. Neither did I question that segregation was Christian...But then my views were completely transformed. I became convinced that God makes no distinctions among people whatever their race....I exchanged the former views which I HAD ABSORBED FROM MY ENVIRONMENT, for the latter views which I learned from the New Testament. I came to understand the meaning of Paul's plea that we "be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind..." Which I had absorbed from my environment – what was in the culture proved to be passing, not enduring.

So, for us, the message has to be the prayer of the collect. That we are conscious that every day, every decision that we make reflects our choice – we'll either cling to what is passing, or recognize, support and choose that which is enduring, for that which moves us ever closer to the Kingdom. Amen.