

23 Pentecost, Proper 27, Yr. A
November 8, 2020
Amos 5:18-24

As I write this, the election is still undecided. What's decided, though, what's perfectly clear, is that we are an extremely divided country. As one commentator put it, so divided that governing has become almost impossible. And that division is accompanied by hostility and resentment. I read a news clip about the clothing company Gap. They had an ad that featured a zippered sweatshirt. One side was red and the other side was blue. The words across the front were: THE ONE THING WE KNOW IS THAT TOGETHER WE CAN MOVE FORWARD. They got so many complaints that they had to pull the ad. Those complaining said that they were glossing over our political divides.

It seems to be a dangerous time. Remember before the Civil War when the nation was divided and Lincoln saying that a house divided against itself cannot stand? Some contemporary writers caution that once again our very democracy is in danger. That democracy is precious. And it poses questions to us: can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings...and offer our attention and not just our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up, trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our pursuit of a living democracy (Terry Williams, *Engagement*). Parker Palmer in his book, *The Heart of Democracy*, looked at those questions and had this to say: On all those questions our hearts are conflicted. We want to be equitable and generous. But we also want to cling jealously to our share, even when it is more than we need. We want to listen to others. But we are afraid of what we might hear....We want to

trust our fellow citizens...but having been hurt...we find it hard to trust.

In a recent column, Garrison Keillor says it's time for reconciliation. On the lighter side, he says that he has friends who still bear a grudge that the Dodgers moved from Brooklyn to LA. Not his problem, he says. He's from Minnesota and if he wants to begrudge someone, he has the Wisconsin cheeseheads, or South Dakota and its Harley guys. He goes on to say that he was raised by Evangelicals to hold a grudge against Anglican, by Ford people to resent those who drove Cadillacs and Buicks. You get the idea. But, he says, the country seems to be seeing an increase in "grudgery" and, for his part, he's going to start following the Bible which, he notes, is in English, so Americans can read it.

Humorous, for sure, but too true to be really funny. But let's go back to that part about reading the Bible.

In the Amos reading this morning, we're hearing an 8th century prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah, going into the northern kingdom of Israel and lamenting the situation he finds there. He starts by criticizing the other nations and I'm sure his listeners are fine with that. But then he turns to them and points out THEIR iniquities. That they are robbing the needy and defrauding the poor, undermining justice and taking bribes. And he tells them that when God responds, it isn't going to go well for them. He goes on to say that God doesn't accept their worship, their offerings. Instead, in that oft-quoted line, God will see to it that "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

The first thing to note is that this isn't a condemnation of worship. Instead, it's a condemnation of the kind of worship that doesn't make a difference in people's lives. It's a ritual they go through

on the Sabbath and then forget about the rest of the time. God wants authentic, transforming worship. It's been said that worship and prayer give us the insight and the courage to engage in our communities compassionately and justly. And that kind of engagement sends us back to worship to renew our vision and our strength, so we can engage again. So it's a cycle: radical engagement with the world that is so intense that we MUST follow that with radical engagement with prayer and then 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 the place of 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 of justice today. And ours is pretty pallid by comparison. We represent justice by a blindfolded figure holding scales, uninvolved and impartial. We often 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 in both the Old and New Testaments, justice 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, going back to Amos, it's because of that centrality, that justice will ultimately prevail.

There's that image of mighty waters sweeping away everything that would prevent or distort God's kingdom. Clearly, one wouldn't want to be standing in the way.

Last week we looked at the Beatitudes. You'll remember that one of them says that those who mourn are among the blessed. Mourning. I think we're being challenged to look at the state of our world and mourn. But, as Paul says in Thessalonians, in another context, we don't grieve, or mourn, as people without hope. Because we have that vision of the Kingdom, of our world as God intended it to be, and we have the assurance that God's will will indeed be done. Hence we have hope. Some of us listened to the National Cathedral's prayer service for the election last week. They named it Hanging on to Hope. And our hope is grounded in our trust in a loving God, so we can hang on with confidence.

I'm thinking that there's a progression here. First we look at the world and see the pain and suffering. And then we compare that to what we know God desires for our world. And we mourn the gap between what IS and WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE. We mourn the gap between the Garden of Eden before the snake and the coming New Jerusalem we read about in Revelation. We mind the gap between what we say and how we live. I'm sure most of you have been in England and hear that wonderful British voice telling you to Mind the Gap. That's our call. To mind the gap, to recognize that it's there, but then to find the courage to step into that gap, to live as people who have put on the mind of God, as people who are called to love God and neighbor. And then we do what's needed to close, to bridge that gap.

In his poem, "A Great Need," the 13th century poet Hafiz says:

Out of a great need,
We are all holding hands

And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For that.

Indeed, it's far too dangerous to let go by refusing to you. I think we have had a glimpse of just how dangerous the terrain can be when it's all against all. Our call, the very point of Christian life is...to stand in radical solidarity with everyone and everything else. We are, indeed, all in this together. We forget that at our peril. Amen.