

THE BUSINESS OF BUSINESS

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MINDING MY OWN BUSINESS

One of my favorite preachers, Doctor Fred Craddock, who taught homiletics at Emory University in Atlanta, tells this story of one of his first experiences as a young preacher.

The town where he served was out west and very small -- 450 people on a good day, he says. (A good day was Saturday, when everyone came to town to do their weekly shopping.)

Anyway, there were about eight churches in this town, and they were pretty much attended and run by the women and children of the town. The men would bring their families into town and drop them off at church and then they would all meet at the diner for breakfast and coffee and talking about crops and weather and sports and the things that men talk about when they get together.

Fred says that it didn't take him long to realize that there was a whole potential male congregation that hung out at the diner on Saturday and Sunday mornings. So, on Saturdays he would make his way there for breakfast and try to meet as many of the men as he could if only just to get to know them.

One man was Frank, a big, middle-aged man who wanted nothing to do with church. When Fred introduced himself, Frank said to him, "Reverend, I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business." In fact, that was kind of a mantra of his. His answer to everything, his personal code, his justification and his rationale could all be summed up in those three things which he shared with everyone whenever the opportunity presented itself: I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business.

So, Fred was understandably surprised when one day Frank showed up at his office and asked if, on the next Sunday, he could be baptized. Fred said that, of course he could, and he did, but preacher or no, he just couldn't help himself. After the service he asked Frank, "So, is it still true?"

Frank nodded, "Yeah. I still work hard. I still take care of my family. And I still mind my own business."

"Well, then why..."

Frank smiled. "I just finally figured out what my business should be."

In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we Christians call the Old Testament, the prophet Amos addresses some people who he hopes will finally figure out what their business should be.

AMOS

Amos is truly one of the “characters” of the Old Testament or what is more properly referred to as The Hebrew Scriptures.

We don’t know anything about him except what appears in the nine chapters of his book. There are no extra-biblical historical records of his existence. He doesn’t appear in history books or in court records of the time. There are no archeological artifacts that refer to him.

So, if we want to know about Amos we have to rely on what he said about himself, and here is what he said:

One: He lived most of his life in the village of Tecoa a few miles from Bethlehem in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Two: He lived in the second half of the 8th century sometime between 780 and 740BCE. We know this because he says that the king of Judah in the south was Uzziah and the king of Israel in the north was Jeroboam, which would have been Jeroboam II, the 14th king of that country.

Three: By trade he was a sheep herder and a keeper of Sycamore (Fig) trees. This doesn’t tell us much, however, as it could mean that he was a rich owner of vast herds and great forests, or he could mean that he was a simple shepherd who also pruned trees in the off season. He seems to be acquainted with physical labor and farm life so most scholars lean toward the latter.

Four: Whatever his original calling, at some point in his life he left it to take up another. The Lord called him to leave his herds and his trees and his hometown and go north into Israel. There he was to tell the people about how God felt about their profligate ways. Especially offensive to God was the way the wealthy treated the poor.

Finally, (five) we know from the way that people responded to Amos, was that he was angry. He yelled, he railed, he swore, he cursed, he drew vivid word pictures of terrible judgment and punishment which God would visit upon the people because of their greed, cruelty and depravity. He was rather raw, sometimes crude in his language.

In today’s text he takes aim at the practices of the wealthy merchants he saw in the marketplace. Let’s take a look.

WALKING THROUGH THE TEXT

As with most of Amos’s sermons, he sets it in the context of a vision.

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ² He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.”

The vision begins with a symbol, in this case a basket of summer fruit.

It is a metaphor for the people of Israel. It looks wonderful. Sweet, delicious, delectable. Each piece more enticing than the next. Here is a peach, there are plums, some grapes, a melon, a banana, a tomato, some strawberries. They are ripe and ready to eat right now. They will never be better than they are at this moment.

But tomorrow? Well, tomorrow they won't be quite so good. The banana will begin to show some brown spots. The tomato will be a little too red, the skin will begin to toughen. The peach will be a little too soft, a little too juicy, as will the plum, the grapes a little withered, a little shrunken.

And two or three days from now we will have to throw them away. They won't just be ripe or over ripe, they will be rotten. Even though these fruits are beautiful to look at and delicious to eat today, their end is near.

So, it is with the aristocracy of Israel. They, too, are beautiful to look at. They are clothed in the finest silks; their wrists and ankles and throats are adorned with gold and silver. They can afford first class makeup and forty-dollar haircuts. They wouldn't think of wearing shirts that didn't have French cuffs. Their shoes are made of rich, Corinthian leather. Their suits are Savile Row, their dresses are Christian Dior, their purses have the designer's initials prominently displayed. They live in luxury and ease, in gated communities where they are never disturbed by any sight of the poor.

But their time has come. The time is ripe for them to be plucked from their lives of privilege. The harvester has passed by them many times, waiting for them to ripen, to mature, but he will pass them by no more. He has waited, hoping that they would change, become more moral, more loving, more generous and sympathetic, but the waiting is over.

“The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord God; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

Now he leaves the ripe fruit metaphor. He quotes God directly.

The hymns the people have been singing in their temple are meaningless because their lives don't reflect the theology they sing. There will be consequences for their hypocrisy. You can't act like these people have acted, talking one way and acting another and not suffer consequences. You can't live like that without paying a price. And the price will be steep, indeed. People's lives are on the line. Even death is not out of the question.

So be silent – or, as we would say, today: shut up and listen.

⁴ Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵ saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?”

You want to know why this is going to happen? It's because you trample the needy in your

rush to get rich and you destroy the poor with your greed. You go to church, but the Word of the Lord isn't in you. It's just an empty exercise for you -- something you do for form's sake because it's what you've always done or because it's good for business.

And all the while you're saying, "How long is this sermon going to last? How much longer until we can get out of this stupid church and get back to the real world and the important work of making money?" They didn't worship God, they worshiped commerce. They bowed not before the altar of Yahweh but before the cash register.

Paul Tillich said that if God is our Ultimate Concern, then that which concerns us ultimately, that which we value as and treat as an ultimate in our lives that thing is God for us.

These people didn't mind giving God a passing nod on the Sabbath, they didn't mind volunteering for the occasional committee and even writing a check now and then for the offering, but their real concern, their ultimate concern was money. It motivated them, it empowered them, it drove them, it was their reason for being. They just didn't have time for God, well, not that God, at any rate. The other God, the one made of green paper, was just too demanding.

So, demanding was that God, in fact, that it often required them to do things that might be considered unethical, even immoral, and sometimes, illegal by people who didn't understand life in the "real world" the dog-eat-dog world of business and commerce.

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶ buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

Here Amos delineates several specific practices that he had witnessed in the market place -- practices that, inevitably cheated from, stole from, lied to, misrepresented to, and victimized the poor.

First, there was the issue of dishonest weights.

Grain was sold by weight, and all a dishonest merchant had to do was use a shaved weight, one that said "one pound" but was actually only fourteen or fifteen ounces. Wealthy customers often carried their own weights to make sure they weren't being cheated but poor people had to trust the merchant they bought from.

So, they were easy prey. The ephahs (bushels) they bought were small and the dollars (shekels) they paid were big.

Secondly, these same merchants, after cheating the poor and making them even poorer and driving them to desperation were then buying their labor, sometimes even indenturing them for the very smallest wages they could get away with paying -- the price of a pair of sandals, for instance.

Thirdly, they were gouging the poor on the price of life's necessities. A man had to have

sandals to work in the fields, but he had to work in the fields to afford a pair of sandals. So, the merchants could name their price and often it was more than a man could make in a day. Laborers worked and, at the end of the day, still couldn't afford to feed their families because they owed everything they made to the man who sold them the sandals.

And fourth, they were doctoring the grain that they sold. The grain from the top of the pile sold for more than that at the bottom because it was purer. That on the bottom of the pile was swept up and often contained dirt and chaff but it wasn't set aside and sold for less. It was set aside and sold to the poor who couldn't afford to complain or take the time off from work to go to court.

⁷ The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

God has sworn by his own name, that is, God has taken an oath. He will not forget any of this. It may seem as though he doesn't see what's happening. It may seem as though these miscreants, liars, cheaters, con artists, and bottom feeders are going unpunished but just you wait. Their day is coming.

This, remember, is the first day of the summer fruit. It still looks good. But the second, third and fourth days are yet to come.

⁸ Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? ⁹ On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.

Things will be shaken up and washed away and it will happen quickly, suddenly like an earthquake or a flash flood. Everyone will be taken by surprise. Things are going to get very, very dark, very, very soon.

¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

The wealthy were known for their rowdy parties, their feasts. But those are all going to come to a sudden, violent and surprising end. Feasts will suddenly change to mourning. Drinking songs will turn into songs of lamentation. Silk suits will become burlap. Expensive haircuts will fall out and be swept from the floor.

The grief will be so profound that someone looking on will think that an only son has died. It will be, quite simply, the worst day of their lives. But those are all symbols, metaphors. What, literally, will that day look like?

¹¹ The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. ¹² They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking

the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

All of this is what happens, says Amos, when we have lost the word of the Lord. This is what happens when we decide to worship other gods, false gods -- gods made of silver, gods made of gold, gods made of green paper, gods made of...oil?

We hunger for truth but there is no truth. We thirst for righteousness but there is no righteousness. We desire not sweet summer fruits but the fruits of God's spirit. We crave not a plum but a plumb line that will guide us and show us what is right and good and true and will measure us when we have strayed off the straight line. We will want not the physical nourishment that comes from our fields but the moral, ethical, spiritual nourishment that comes from the word of the Lord.

But, alas, we will be hungry and thirsty. We will grow faint and fall and perish. For the word of the Lord will not be with or in us.

The choices we make in the marketplace have consequences. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that those consequences are just short term, just the cost of doing business. If we want certain things we have to be willing to pay that cost, right?

I know those temptations firsthand, brothers and sisters. I worked in retail, and I know what it is like to worry that my family is relying on my commission to put food on the table and pay the bills. I know the temptations that lurk around every sale.

It's not that you're tempted to lie, exactly.

It's more about what you choose not to tell, not to disclose, not to say. It's about selling up when you know they don't really need to move up to a better, more expensive model but it would sure help your bottom line if they did. It's about increasing the price just because you think they can handle it. It's about renting instead of financing the sale because there's no limit on the amount of interest you can charge as "rental fees."

And, besides, everyone is doing it. How can we compete if we don't do it, too? We'll go out of business, and no one wins when businesses close their doors. So, we'll just hold our nose and we'll do it and if we get caught and have to pay a penalty, well, that's just the cost of doing business.

If we have to spend a small fraction of our \$2 billion dollars of profits on a fine because our diabetes medication causes heart attacks, well, that's just the cost of doing business. If we have to spend a fraction of our \$17 billion dollars in annual profits to clean up an oil spill, well, that's just the cost of doing business. If we lie, cheat, misrepresent, gouge, and otherwise steal from the public, and get caught and we lose some customers, well, that's just the cost of doing business. Besides, the public has a short memory. They'll be back.

But, Amos reminds us, it doesn't stop there.

When we justify corrupt business practices we may do well for a short time, like that basket of

fruit, but we create a culture of dishonesty that, like a house of cards, sooner or later, must collapse under its own weight.

And we need not look very far to see Amos's prophecy coming true in our own lives, to see songs turned to lamentations and feasts turned to mourning, to see things looking pretty dark and people wandering from sea to sea and from north to east, going to and fro in search for some word of comfort, some word of promise from the Lord but hearing nothing because they have long ago forgotten how to speak and hear that language.

Fortunately, Amos does not leave us there. He returns, as ever, to his formula for revival and renewal, the most famous and enduring lines from his book. The evidence of righteousness is not to be found in the singing of hymns, nor in the giving of offerings, not in the length of our prayers or the piety of our liturgies.

Do you want to make God happy, he asks. Do you want your lives to go well and the lives of your children and grandchildren? Do you want to know that you have lived your life in the company of righteous people and in the cooling shade of God's presence and approval? Then do this:

Remember that only God is god.

Be humble in the way you use whatever power God has given to you and...

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:24)

That! That makes God happy. And on that day, says the Lord:

***...the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people ...
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them... (9: 13b-15)***