

A World Re-ordered In Christ

Pentecost+7B

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Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85, Ephesians 1:1-14, Mark 6:7-13

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my reflections with you again. Our scriptures this morning point to beautiful images of God's restoration, the restoration of his kingdom to wholeness, unity, and love. However, we cannot look at this restoration without also examining the neglect and disintegration that calls for the need to restore.

Doug's e-mail this week referred to today's readings as revealing the stark contrast between the systems of power in the world and the way of God. Today I want to look at how we have neglected that way and what restoration looks like. Throughout the Biblical narrative we see these systems of power, that humans long for and God allows, inevitably move us away from unity and love. Historically, systems of power have put us, humans, in charge of administering the sacred. Meaning we have taken on the role of God in determining who and what has worth, disintegrating community and right relation in favor of empowering some while oppressing others. In contrast, God's way, the Gospel, the teachings or revelations of Christ, declare that the created is inherently sacred. There is no need for humans to impose worth. In Christ we are instilled with dignity that is not manipulated by the hand of man, a unified family reflecting his glory. This is the kingdom of God, a transformed way of seeing and being, rooted in true love, justice, and righteousness. And while this kingdom has come as we will see in Mark and Ephesians...

There is still the tension of not yet... because like the Israelites in Amos, we continue to align with the systems of this world and its distorted ways of love, justice and righteousness. We bend toward othering- placing ourselves and those like us on the side of right while condemning and passing judgement on those who are different. We neglect God's way. We are still in need of restoration.

Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary portrays this tension well in her conversation with Krista Tippet for On Being. She says, "The complicated character of human life is that on the one hand God creates us to be glorious—gives us [powers] of intellect and love and connection and art... and yet right next to this glorious side is this weird propensity that human beings have to choose what is not good for them. To choose evil. To sin. To close their eyes to the love of God and their own glory and to become harmful and self-destructive and destructive of others."

We experience God's glory and we choose to neglect, even destroy, it.

My questions this morning are...

How am I neglecting the glory and unity of Christ and instead choosing destruction?

How am I aligning with the systems of power in the world and neglecting the way of Christ and his kingdom?

As we reflect on these questions, let's take a look at our scriptures this morning to see what God's restoration looks like, then let's contrast that with our propensity toward neglect, destruction and alignment with systems of power.

Amos is a farmer living, working, and speaking at a time of Israel's wealth as a nation. They have become apathetic. They worship idols. Their systems benefit the wealthy, oppressing and neglecting the poor. They practice slavery. And the Israelites claim to love and worship God. Amos exposes this dissonance. He says that their lip service to God is just that- void based on their neglect of God's way. Amos says that knowing God leads to transformation, leads to true love, justice and righteousness. The Israelites have instead aligned with the systems of power and its perversions of justice and righteousness. God says he will dismantle these human systems in order to restore his kingdom.

The message of God through Amos is strong, direct, and clear:

In chapter 5 he says:

(NIV) I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship 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!

God wants justice. He wants righteousness.

I want to camp here for a minute before we get to today's text as it gets at the heart of both my neglect and what needs to be restored.

This justice and righteousness that God calls me to in Amos is the justice and righteousness that mark his kingdom. I wonder how we have experienced these concepts, through the way of God or through the perversions of our systems of power?

As I put these words through my experience and lens, righteousness evokes something unattainable. To be righteous is to be good, morally superb as defined by our culture, even, maybe especially, our Christian culture. And justice, this word often carries a punitive connotation--punishment when someone has done wrong, when they are not righteous.

But it is clear from Amos and the poetry of our Psalm today--

Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.

¹² The LORD will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.

¹³ Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps.]

-- that there is a much fuller, deeper understanding of kingdom justice and kingdom righteousness.

In attempts to get at that, I consult the Hebrew used in this text and many others to name God's justice and righteousness. I have brought these words up before- tzedakah righteousness and mishpat justice. If you want to deep dive, There is a lot of reading and work out there right now surrounding these two concepts, especially in our current climate as we continue to reckon with systems of inequality at work in our society and seek social justice.

But in summary, tzedakah righteousness centers on relationship. Righteousness is living connected, integrated in community. It includes charity, ensuring everyone's needs are met, and equitable relationship, or the belief in human dignity, that we are innately created equal. This concept of righteousness is a far cry from being morally superb.

And mishpat justice ensures tzedakah, right relationship, when it is not happening. In other words, if we are not in right relationship then that must be restored, so the ultimate goal of mishpat justice is restoration to wholeness and flourishing in community. Quite different from the singular lens of retributive justice.

So God has told his people this is what he wants. Not their sacrifices, not their meeting together in his name, not their singing. Right relation collectively.

Amos goes on to prophesy how the choices of God's people, ignoring righteousness and justice, will lead to destruction.

This is the backdrop of the vision that God gives Amos in chapter 7, our reading today. After two visions of Israel's destruction by external forces, locusts and fire, in which Amos pleads with God for mercy and God meets this plea, he is given a third vision that speaks for itself. It is directed at destruction from within. Amos does not beg for mercy.

God places a plum line in the midst, or to the heart, of his people. A plum line is used to determine if a wall is straight, right or just. If it is not, there are likely deeper issues, foundation work that must be restored or the wall, even the building will collapse.

The plum line reveals that the Israelites are headed toward destruction, in need of restoration. Amos does not argue.

What seems to be at the heart of the "crooked" Israelites?

According to scripture, refusing right relationship through collective injustice. Worshiping idols that promote this injustice. Using God. Denying their own and others inherent dignity by meting out worth. Accumulating wealth at the expense and exploitation of the vulnerable—the poor, widow, orphan, and immigrant. Denying freedom to the oppressed.

Were God to place the plum line of kingdom righteousness and justice in my heart, what would he find?

How am I neglecting the glory and unity of Christ and instead choosing destruction?

What does my plum line measure? It is my vertical the same as what God reveals, or do I need to reassess what I deem straight, just, and right?

How am I aligning with the systems of power in the world and neglecting the way of Christ and his kingdom?

At the end of Amos, despite what we now know, that the Israelites will indeed succumb to destruction, God promises restoration. Much like the imagery in Psalm 85 where God also restores, it is a flourishing community consistent with the character of a loving God.

The story doesn't stop with the promised restoration. In the gospel of Mark, this message of restoration continues, as Jesus, the embodiment of righteousness and justice, ushers in the kingdom come. Restoration is here. Jesus confronts evil and brings wholeness and invites others in. In chapter 6, he sends out followers to do this work, to heal, to free and to offer repentance. This repentance is not what we have come to know, like a one-time conversion mission. Jesus hasn't even died yet. This is a deeper call to unity to wholeness to restoration. Repentance means to go a different way, Jesus and his disciples are offering a different way, God's way as opposed to aligning to the systems of power. It is the way of kingdom righteousness and justice, right relation born out of a transformative encounter with the love of God. The transforming love of God restores us to wholeness, to unity in Christ, a flourishing community, glory.

And while many are indeed transformed by these encounters, throughout the book of Mark, God's message remains largely shrouded in mystery as we [humans] can't seem to accept a kingdom that looks like his, that is not bound by the systems of power we have worked so hard to uphold. A kingdom where dignity is inherent, and all are equal. Even the disciples are certain that their proximity to Jesus will bring them power and privilege.

We experience glory, yet we choose destruction.

God's message does not remain a mystery. As we culminate with the beautiful letter to the Ephesians, I have to pause here to acknowledge Joe Gordon, and plug his class, *Reading Scripture in the 21st Century*. The reference that he made to Ephesians 1:10, embedded in our test today, resonated so deeply with me and has served to mark this passage as a plum line of its own. He highlighted the simple truth here that God has made his mystery known. We are not left wondering or guessing what his will for us is. We know it. His will is bringing all things together

in Christ. The restoration of his kingdom, unity in flourishing community marked by inherent sacredness and dignity.

Even with mystery known, glory revealed, as evidenced by Paul's writing this to the Ephesians, we still need this reminder and encouragement to reference our lives by God's way, using the revelation of Christ as the plum line rather than systems of power in the dominant culture, even Christian culture.

I ask again, what is my plum line?

How am I neglecting the glory and unity of Christ and instead choosing destruction?

How am I aligning with the systems of power in the world and neglecting the way of Christ and his kingdom?

I want to end by reading a portion of Ephesians from the message:

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. *Abundantly* free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

¹¹⁻¹² It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

Restoration has come.

We are centered in his will, and we are invited to participate in his love. We are recipients of his favor on all creation, integrated into this flourishing, universal, kingdom family. Let this profoundly impact the way that I relate to one another, how I live.