

Sunday, July 11, 2004  
"How'm I Doing?"  
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This past week John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, selected John Edwards, senator from North Carolina and former presidential candidate, to be his running mate. During the primary season when Edwards harbored hopes of being on the top of the ticket his signature stump speech was one where he drew a picture of 2 Americas – one wealthy and getting wealthier and one poor and getting poorer. In his speech Edwards says: "It seems today we have two Americas. With two health care systems . . . one for the privileged; another rationed by insurance companies. Two public school systems . . . one for the haves; and one for everyone else. Two tax systems . . . where the wealthy and corporations pay less; and working families pay more. Two governments, one for the powerful interests and lobbyists, and the other for the rest of us." Now you can agree or disagree with Senator Edwards's assessment of our country, but he would have been right on the mark had he been talking about the ancient northern kingdom of Israel in the year 760 BCE. John Edwards' stump speech could have come right out of the mouth of the prophet Amos whose words we look at this morning.

For many people times were good in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Under the able leadership of King Jereboam II Israel was more prosperous, had a stronger military presence in the region, and was geographically larger than it had been for centuries. Israel's army had won back territories lost since the days of King Solomon. She was at peace with the southern kingdom of Judah. And Israel had standing as a kingdom to be reckoned with in the international community. From the outside Israel seemed like a country on a roll – what could possibly be wrong or go wrong for them?

But there was a seamy underside to Israel's new found prosperity and promise. There were, indeed, two Israels. Many of the marginal members, the have nots, of Israel's society were being exploited so the rich could get richer. A great chasm existed between rich and poor and there was virtually no middle class. The poor were oppressed – used and abused by the wealthy and the powerful for their own personal gain and comfort. Servants were paid slave wages so they had no hope of ever moving beyond their lowly social caste. The legal system was completely controlled by the rich people so they were able to manipulate it and, through fraudulent practices, foreclose on the property of those less fortunate making them even poorer. Money lenders flagrantly violated one of God's laws for the people – that of never charging interest on a loan – and then imposed cruel penalties on those who were unable to pay the loans back. Favoritism toward the rich, unequal justice in the courts and exploitation of the poor were rampant in Israel and this was the situation God's prophet Amos was called to address.

Amos was a farmer from the southern kingdom of Judah, not a professional prophet or clergy person. He was a breeder of sheep and a sycamore fig cultivator meaning that his job was to pinch the sycamore fruit to make it ripen quicker and make the fruit sweeter. And, Amos, of all the minor prophets, paid the most attention to the plight and needs of the poor. Social justice and economic issues were the emphasis of Amos' preaching to the people of Israel. Amos told the people that God was not happy with them. God did not approve of the way the poor, needy, and helpless were treated by the rich in this society and that God would bring punishment in the form of shameful exile and destruction to the people of Israel. Amos' message was not well-received. Times were good. The rich were comfortable. We're religious people – was the response. Who does this guy from Judah think he is, not even one of us, to come in and tell us that God wants to destroy us? Why should we listen to him? Why should we change our reasonable and pragmatic ways just because he says so?

The section of Amos we're focusing on today comes toward the end of the short book and contains the third of a series of five visions God gave Amos about Israel's future and a confrontation between Amos and the highest religious leader of Israel. The two earlier visions were ones of God's plans for the destruction of Israel because of Israel's covenant breaking activity. After each of these visions Amos asks God to forgive Israel, to give them more time to turn from their evil ways, to be more patient with them. Both times God relents and does what Amos asks. Our passage this morning begins with the third vision. In this vision Amos sees God standing next to a wall with a plumb line. Those of you who build things or anyone who has ever hung wall paper knows what a plumb line is. It is a line with a weight on the end which will determine whether or not a wall is straight or in plumb. God shows Amos how this wall is straight but cautions him that God is about to cast the same plumb line into the midst of the people of Israel and that they will not measure up. The perfection of the plumb line will show how out of kilter, how far away from God's covenant the people of Israel have strayed. So just like a leaning wall must be demolished for safety's sake so must Israel be destroyed because of its sin. God will not avert judgment on Israel this time. God's patience has run out. After this vision Amos went to Bethel, a holy place and the seat of state religion for Israel, to preach this vision to the people, to call to them to turn back to God. There he was confronted by Amaziah, the chief priest and religious adviser to King Jereboam. Because Amos' preaching was critical of the king predicting the annihilation of the present dynasty and the exile of the population and because Amaziah did not want to lose his status and influence with the king and the people, Amaziah tried to stop Amos from preaching at Bethel. He sent a message to the king misquoting the prophet which made it seem that Amos was guilty of conspiracy or even treason. Then Amaziah meets with the prophet Amos at Bethel and threatens Amos with arrest if he doesn't return to his native Judah immediately. Amos responds that he has come to preach at Bethel out of obedience to God not for his own personal gain. And with that Amos has a personal message to Amaziah from God. "Things will get so bad for you," says Amos to Amaziah, "that your wife will become a prostitute

on the streets, your children will be slain in battle, all of your land will be divided up, and you will die in a foreign land.”

And in time, history tells us, that in spite of Amos’ prophecy and call to Israel to renew their covenant with God Israel refuses to listen, is invaded, occupied, and its people are carried off to exile in a foreign land.

For me, one of the most interesting parts of this story and of the entire book of Amos is the audience to whom Amos’ preaching was directed. Amos was not preaching to the pagans, the followers of gods other than Yahweh. He was not preaching to atheists and agnostics. He was not preaching to people who were spiritually indifferent. He was preaching to people who considered themselves and who probably most of the rest of the world considered quite religious. If one were to stop the average Israelite on the street and ask him about his religious devotion I’m sure he would go on and on about his worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He would talk of his participation in the religious festivals and of his sacrifices made according to God’s law. And he might even add that his own prosperity and that of his nation were due to the blessing of God because he was one of God’s chosen people. The people of the kingdom of Israel thought that because they did religious things and participated in religious rituals they were pleasing God, giving God everything asked for. But God cares more about living up to the things God values than any kind of religious ritual or voicing of religious beliefs and words.

Jesus echoed these sentiments in our Gospel lesson, the familiar story of the good Samaritan. A man is robbed, beaten and left for dead on a treacherous stretch of road. Several very religious people pass the man and for various reasons do not stop to help him as they head toward Jerusalem. But, finally someone does stop to help him. The identity of the man who offers help probably set Jesus’ audience back on its heels. The man who stopped to help was a despised Samaritan. The pious, god-fearing Jews left one of their own to suffer on the side of the road while a man who under other circumstances would have hated the robbed and beaten man and whom the robbed and beaten man would also have hated stops to help, brings the man to an inn to recuperate, and pays his medical expenses. Jesus told this story to answer the question “Who is my neighbor?” The one who shows mercy is the answer. God cares more about what you do than how religious you are.

Both the wealthy, religious people of the kingdom Israel and the priest and the Levite of Jesus’ story had forgotten this point. They thought that their religious observances and participation were more important and meant more to God than showing justice and mercy to the poor, downtrodden, and beaten. They had forgotten the second part of God’s greatest command “to love ones neighbor as oneself.” And I think that perhaps, the North American church of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have forgotten this point as well. Just perhaps, if we’d been less concerned about building huge buildings and mounting big programs

for our own edification and more concerned with what it means to be a neighbor in our own communities and the world – just perhaps the world would be a better place and Christians would be welcomed and loved in many places where they are despised.

So if the neighbor is the one who showed mercy – how do we be neighborly today in our very complex world? Perhaps we start first with our literal neighbors those people who we bump up against daily as we go about our business. I have a habit of misplacing my keys – even to the point of locking myself out of places. A few months ago I returned home from being here on a Sunday morning. I parked my car in the garage and grabbed everything out of the car I thought I needed but neglected to take my purse which contained my house keys. Now this would not have been a problem except that I was in the habit of locking my garage door and I didn't realize that I didn't have my house keys until I had locked that door behind me. What was I going to do? I panicked for a moment because I'd also locked my cell phone in the garage as well. I knew that my two downstairs neighbors weren't home so I knocked on my across the hall neighbor's door hoping and praying that she would be home. She was. Feeling like an idiot I explained to her what I had done though I really didn't know what she could do to help me. But she wanted to help me. Together we tried to pick the lock. That didn't work. We got out a ladder to see if I could climb over the wall from her garage to mine but decided trying to do that would only result in a broken ankle. Finally, she called the caretaker of our condominium complex. Thankfully, he was home and he was able to figure out how to get into my garage. Now my neighbor and I are not great friends. We chat in the hallway now and then and I share my newspapers with her but we don't share our lives. We don't go out to dinner. But that Sunday afternoon she showed me mercy. She was, indeed, my neighbor.

But what about societal injustices like what was going on in the nation of Israel. As people who say we follow Jesus we need to do something about them as well – we need to be neighborly to those who need mercy or help or justice. Participating in or ignoring injustice was the very thing that caused God to send the chosen people into exile. How do we live out what God values in this very difficult and complex global village where the problems and their causes often seem overwhelming, insurmountable and contradictory?

Perhaps the first thing is to be aware of what's happening in our country and the world – pay attention. Read the newspapers. Watch the news. Read non-fiction books about global problems and life in places that are very different from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Go on mission trips. Visit the websites of World Relief, World Vision, and other relief agencies. Do you know about the horrors happening in the Sudan? Are you aware of the impact of AIDS on the poorest people in the world? Do you know about the difficulties facing the city of St. Paul as they attempt to settle this new wave of Hmong refugees? We can't even begin to care about any of these injustices until we know about them. And we can't

begin to do anything about them until we care about them. And God desires that we care about these things – because God cares deeply about them.

Then, ask God and this community to make you into the type of person who has God's wisdom to know what to do in the face of such large scale evil and injustice as is seen in every corner of our world every day. The epistle lesson for today was from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. Paul writes to the people of this church" . . . we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." Let God show you where your attention should be. Let God show you how to rid your little corner of the world or, maybe, even a larger corner of the world of injustice. Let God show you how to work together with God's spirit to redeem all of God's creation. This can happen as you allow the fruit of the Holy Spirit to grow in you.

I have a friend who says that he is turning into a behaviorist when he tries to define what it means to be a person of faith. He doesn't mean that faith is about classic Skinnerian stimulus – response and operant conditioning. What he means is that he thinks that truly loving God and following in the way of Jesus is more about what one does, how one behaves than what one believes. While I do think that right belief ought to result in right action – it doesn't always seem to. And I do think that God cares more about what we do than that we get every jot and tittle of our theology right. So the question I leave you with today is one I ask myself as well – how are you doing? How well are you doing in living a life reflective of God's values? How well are you doing at seeing the entire world, not just your own life, through God's eyes?