

Pastor Martha Schwehn Bardwell
Sermon for October 14, 2018
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Mark 10:17-31

As many of you know, every Wednesday we gather at 10:15 am for Bible study, and together we read the Scripture for the upcoming Sunday. We always start with the Hebrew Bible – so this last Wednesday, after we prayed, someone volunteered to read and the voice of the prophet Amos launched into the room, crying out about injustice, about widespread disregard for the truth, about people living poverty being trampled on. There was a pause after we read it and I remember looking across the circle at someone who said, “Wow, things haven’t changed.” There was a collective sigh. And then we went around the circle as we always do - and each person had a chance to share what struck them.

As we went around, many people noticed this particular verse: “Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.”

For a while we considered the mixed messages we were getting from Amos. Here is Amos, crying out in the public square! Full-throated prophesy! Full-throated judgment! And then we hear him in this verse saying that the prudent, the wise, will keep silent in such a time.

What kind of silence could he mean? Perhaps – it’s the silence of listening. (Because – “If we want to love our neighbor, we’ve gotta start by – listening!”). Perhaps it’s the silence of prayer. Or perhaps Amos is saying that in such an evil time words have so been trampled on that what we need is not more talking but rather embodied works of love as we seek to love good and hate evil.

I recently heard the kind of political speech our president is engaged in – the kind that has such open disdain for truth and such cruel hostility towards those who would challenge him– described as “smashmouth politics.” How do we follow Christ and use our voices to build a culture of peace in an era of smashmouth politics?

I read a story a couple of days ago that spoke right into this question of how we might use our voices as people of faith in such a time as this. It’s from a woman named Onnesha Roychoudhuri.¹

¹ You can read her story here: <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2018/10/12/so-i-sang/>. It’s an excerpt from her book, *The Marginalized Majority: Re-Claiming Our Power In a Post-Truth America* (2018).

She was sitting on the subway in New York when a man came onto her car and started holding forth with “an impassioned and bigoted tirade”. He just kept going on and on for minutes; some people tried to silence him unsuccessfully. Onnesha faced this internal dilemma. Do I just ignore it? OR do I do something? She recognized quickly that keeping silent was probably a better option than trying to engage him in some rational way because as she wrote, (quote) “here’s the thing about narcissistic ideologues: they don’t respond to logic, or dissuasion in the name of facts or reason. We could fact-check him all day and night, but he wasn’t playing by the rules of the game...(pause)...In that moment, I wrestled with a familiar feeling of resignation and powerlessness. I closed my eyes in the stuffy train and thought to myself; It’ll be over soon. But I was tired of allowing the loudest and most bombastic among us to take control by default.” (end quote)

So here’s what she did: she started to sing “Row, row, row your boat.”

She writes: (quote) “The first round...was shaky and a little off-key. It was all I could muster. But a few people joined in the next round, and by the third, everyone on the train was singing robustly—including a couple kids in strollers who clapped their hands in glee. The proselytizer tried to get loud, but we got louder. Suddenly, we were no longer the audience for a hateful man. He got off at the next stop, yet we kept singing a few more rounds, smiling at each other and enjoying the simple joy of the reality and world that we’d reclaimed.” (endquote)

It’s a vision of hope, isn’t it. It’s a vision of how a song turned these strangers into joyful co-creators of a harmonious peace.

This morning, we sang together, dare I say robustly, a few rounds of a different simple water song, “Love is flowing from the fountain of life” as we gathered around the font for Isabella Ann Knutson’s baptism. Perhaps some of us had arrived this morning weary of the evil in the world. Weary of our own sin and inadequacies and failures. Weary of bigoted tirades. And we found ourselves caught up in this song expressing this great truth - that love divine flows among us. We looked around at each other, youth and kids and adults and elders all singing together and smiling at each other.

This song drowned out the noise. It prepared us for a moment drenched in truth, in love, in grace, as God’s promises washed over Bella and claimed her as a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ, forever. We welcomed her into the family of Christ, as our sister. Ahhh. This is what our voices

are made for, friends. For singing such songs, for speaking such promises, for welcoming such a sister as Bella.

When we come to the font, we leave some things behind. One of those things is – we leave behind a narrow sense of family. Here, at the font, God dramatically expands our sense of family! Today Isabella received godmothers in Cindy and Catherine, a godfather in Joe, godbrothers Ellis and Theron, and a whole company of siblings – you and I – who surrounded her and promised to support her in her life in Christ.

Perhaps this is what Jesus was talking about in the gospel this morning – these things we leave behind, when we come to the font – only to receive abundance beyond measure. After Peter says – “Look, we have left everything and followed you,” Jesus says,

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age— houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions— and in the age to come eternal life.”

In receiving the gift of baptism, Bella is receiving a hundredfold now in this age, the family Jesus is describing. She has not only her dad’s house, and her grandma’s house to live in, but this house of worship to call her own – she has Cindy’s house to go to and bake which I understand she did yesterday. Jesus seems to be pointing to this but also to much more– pointing to the Christian family, yes, but also beyond it. Because in addition to uniting us to our Christian family, baptism also unites us to a life in deep solidarity with the entire human family. Perhaps Jesus is saying – when you follow me you will leave behind the narrow, biological sense of family, and now receive every human being you encounter, every person sitting across from you on the subway – as your family. You will now look at them as your brother, sister, mother – that’s what living with the reign of God looks like.

It is a gift and a calling to live in a love like that, to step into the great adventure of following Jesus who opened to us this way of the reign of God. In drawing us into this great adventure by his call, Jesus does not promise a life without hardship. Notice that accompanying this declaration of abundant family, and the gift of eternal life, Jesus says that yes, there will be persecutions. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross, after all. This one who used his voice to speak the truth to power; this one who used his silence to listen to the cries of the lowly, the trampled, those in poverty; this one who restored these ones to beloved community and embodied God’s love for the world – this Christ knew persecution through his betrayal, arrest,

and death on the cross. But even this could not break God's promises, that life would win over death, that love would have the final victory.

So how will we follow Jesus today, friends? Having this vision of family, this promise of eternal life to hold on to, what can we let go of that might be keeping us from the life and love that blesses us one hundred fold? Like the rich man this morning – is it our wealth? Have some of us fallen into a place where our money has so blinded us to the sufferings and gifts of others, so that we no longer see them as our siblings, as the ones Christ came to love and liberate? Do some of us first-world Christians have so much stuff that we don't even realize the spiritual poverty we are living with, so that our stuff seems to own us and our time more than following the call of Jesus?

This text today should provoke tension in those of us who have wealth – I know I'm feeling it. Holy tension. As we sit with this tension, and wonder at the love flowing from the fountain of life – we have a chance to practice letting go in just in a few minutes. The offering plate will come by, and we can practice letting go of our money for the sake of the good news. And then after we've let go, we will soon after that get to approach this table empty handed, where we will receive in our hands the only thing we really need for life abundant: The presence of Jesus Christ.

May God renew our voices for justice this day; may God renew our silence for listening to the call of Christ; may God renew our vision to see all people as part of God's family. Yes, may it be so. Amen.