

TEXT: Amos 5:18-24
THEME: God desires justice
SUBJECT: Justice
TITLE: Shalom

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
08 November 2020
Messiah Moravian
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“Let justice roll down like waters, and goodness like an ever flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24 NAB)

Water is to us as justice is to God. No water, no life; no justice, no shalom.

As I read the text from the prophet Amos, I was reminded of Abraham Heschel’s wonderful book, *The Prophets*. It is a college text book I have kept. Reading this book opened my eyes and mind to the fact that God is interested in more than my “personal salvation.” God desires “shalom.”

Shalom has many meanings ranging from the basic conceptual notion of well-being, safety, and contentment to the absence of warfare and violence. It is a greeting and a personal blessing. It is related to the practice of justice which is the condition for peace. It is explicitly used in distinction to war in the prophetic literature.

God, through Amos, declares: “I spurn with loathing your pilgrim-feasts; I take no pleasure in your sacred ceremonies. Spare me the sound of your songs; I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes” (REB). What God wants instead is for the people “to *let* justice flow on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream” (REB).

“*Let* justice flow on like a river . . .” Why would we build dams to block the flow of justice? Because, according to Amos, the privileged profit from injustice.

Amos was working as a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees when he was suddenly overwhelmed by God and called to be a prophet. The prophet’s eye is directed to the contemporary scene; the society and its conduct are the main theme of his speeches. The Northern Kingdom of Israel reached the summit of its material power and prosperity, expanding its territory northward and southward, under the long and brilliant reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786-746 BCE).

When God sent Amos to speak the prophetic word, the one percent enjoyed great prosperity and took enormous pride in their power to do as they pleased. They had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory and furnished with gorgeous couches complete with damask pillows, on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts.

They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils, and drank wine from large bowls. At the same time there was no justice in the land, the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery, and the judges were corrupt.

In the midst of this atmosphere, Amos, a shepherd, exclaims: “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It will mean darkness, not light, as when someone runs a way from a lion only to meet a bear; or goes into the house and rests a hand against the wall only to be bitten by a snake.” If you think you can luxuriate in prosperity while exploiting the poor, if you think you can appease God with your singing in the temple while your judges pervert justice, you are in for a rude awakening.

Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern. There is a living God who cares. Amos assures the people that God’s supreme concern is righteousness/goodness and that God’s essential demand of the people is to establish justice. To Amos, the good is not apart from God. Seeking God and seeking the good amount to the same search.

To have one’s eyes and mind opened to the larger claims of God is one thing, but it is quite another to have one’s heart opened and to open one’s arms to the poor. The questions we ask are revealing. In American Evangelical Christianity, we hear these questions: “If you die tonight, do you know where you will go?” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” “Have you been saved?” These questions assume Christian faith is about the individual.

The questions Jesus puts to us again and again, in his own words, in his death and resurrection, and also in the life and death of his saints and martyrs are: “Whose is the voice you speak with?” “Whose are the needs you speak for?” “What is the truth you embody?” (Rowan Williams’ formulation) These questions assume Christian faith is about the neighbor, the health and well-being of the neighbor.

A close friend of Oscar Romero’s said, “The poor broke his heart, and the wound never closed.” Romero’s notion of the work of the church, his understanding of the Christian faith, changed in light of the slaughter of innocent peasants by the Salvadoran National Guard in 1974 and 1975. His “conversion” came to a climax with the murder of his Jesuit friend Rutilio Grande in March of 1977.

In the early summer of 1977, soon after his installation as Archbishop, Romero spoke to the people in plain terms: “You are the image of the divine victim . . . You are Christ today, suffering in history.” These words were uttered in a town where soldiers had shot open the tabernacle in the church and left the floor littered with consecrated hosts. There could be no more powerful sign of what was going on in terms of the war of the state against the body of Christ.

The task of the church, Romero believed, was to be the voice of the suffering body of Christ today. So his question to all those who have the freedom to speak in the Church and for the Church is, “Who do you really speak for?” The question really is, “Who do you feel with?” Romero knew that this kind of “feeling with” meant taking risks with and for the body of Christ.

Romero assured his people that if every priest and bishop was silenced (killed), “Each one of you will have to be a microphone of God; each one of you will have to be a messenger and a *prophet*.”

The church will always exist as long as there is even one baptized person, and that one baptized person remaining in the world will be responsible for holding up to the world the Lord's banner of truth and of divine justice."

Romero's question and challenge is addressed to all of us, not only to those who have the privilege of some sort of public megaphone for their voices. The Church is maintained in truth, and the whole Church has to be a community where the truth is told about the abuses of power and the cries of the vulnerable.

For Amos, for Oscar Romero, for all prophets and saints, justice is to God as water is to us. No water, no life; no justice, no shalom.

On one occasion when Romero was returning from abroad, an official at the airport said loudly as he passed, "There goes the truth." It is hard to think of a better tribute to any Christian. If we believe that the Church is graced with the Spirit of Truth, we need to remember that this is about a truth that "convicts" (John 16:18), a truth that exposes us to a divine presence, a light that will show us who we are and what the world is and where our values are adrift.

The Church has to be truly the dwelling place of the Spirit by becoming a place where suffering and injustice are named for what they are. It may not make for a superficially placid Church, but only when truth about human pain is allowed an honest voice can there be healing for the Church or the world.

PRAYER: from the *Book of Common Prayer*

Show us your mercy, O Lord;
And grant us your salvation.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
Let your people sing with joy.
Give peace, O Lord, in all the world;
For only in you can we live in safety.
Lord, keep this nation under your care;
And guide us in the way of justice and truth.
Let your way be known upon earth;
Your saving health among all nations.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And sustain us with your Holy Spirit.