

Both Amos and Isaiah said it. “God is not listening.” Of course, if you came to me and asked, “Does God listen to my prayers?” I would say, “Of course, God is always eager to hear your prayers, for God loves you and is always compassionate toward you, eager to listen, longing to have a closer relationship with you through prayer.” Yet the scriptures are full of dialectical tensions - God loves us and God hates our sin. So while there is assurance that God is always nearer than our hands and feet, aware of our needs before we ask and eager to help us, there are also pleas from the faithful -- that God *might* hear their prayers. Just as we said earlier in this service, “Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.”

None of us would be so bold as to say that God answers all our prayers as we request, for we know that God knows best. We might even quote the Study Catechism of the PCUSA, saying, “God takes all our prayers into account, weighing them with perfect wisdom, and responding to them by a perfect will...God answers our prayers, particularly for temporal blessings, only in ways that are compatible with the larger purposes of God’s glory and our salvation.” But the scriptures are full of challenging words, so whenever you declare something absolute about God (like God hears all our prayers and God loves for our praise in worship) then you have to remember there is probably some verse of scripture that challenges that absolute - like Amos when he speaks God’s word to the people, telling them to stop their worship, God is not interested in their praise or prayers. No, until they start living as God has asked, God does not want their fake praise. Until they walk the walk, God wants them to stop talking the talk.

Amos sets the tone for all the minor prophets by calling God’s people to a life of justice and right living, as a reflection of the holiness of the awesome God we serve. Both Amos and Isaiah and many of the prophets would appreciate the G.K. Chesterton line: “Just going to church does

not make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.”

The question is, are you being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ? Or from the perspective of this Hebrew prophet, are you loving good and hating evil, or caught up in the evil yourself?

Amos comes from a small town south of Jerusalem, where he likely was a herdsman, but he travels to the north, to Beth-El to disturb the complacent. He speaks God’s word in the 8th Century BCE in a time where there was great inequity between rich and poor. Amos speaks God’s truth where exploitation is happening at a time of great prosperity for the few. It is interesting and sad to note that 2800 years later Amos could be speaking to us about similar issues of disparity and complacency.

#### **Amos 5:12-24**

<sup>12</sup> For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. <sup>14</sup> Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. <sup>15</sup> Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. <sup>16</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas! alas!" They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; <sup>17</sup> in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD. <sup>18</sup> Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; <sup>19</sup> as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. <sup>20</sup> Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? <sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. <sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. <sup>23</sup> Take

away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. <sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (NRS)

At the Montreat Youth Conference, our theme was The Missing Peace. That's PeAce, of course. Yet you have probably already surmised that when we arrived in Montreat, we announced boldly, "No more worries. The Missing Peace is here!" Yes, we were there in full force. I was so thankful to see our youth grow in faith, and in peaceful and just living, as we lived in one house - all 20 of us, representing three different congregations and lots of personalities. We had Presbyterians from the church Kim Adams serves in Bloomington, IN and we had Hannah Langowski, whose family now attends Geneva Presbyterian in Switzerland FL. We had the Notos grandson Kai from St Pete, and for one meal, we had a dozen friends from First Presbyterian, Sarasota with us.

As the theme of The Missing Peace progressed, it became clear that we were going to stay focused on the second half of the great commandment: love your neighbor as you love yourself. And then it hit me - that's Amos' focus too. If you don't love your neighbor, God doesn't want your empty praise. How can you claim to worship God if you don't care about the people God created? How can you bring God songs and prayers for your own blessing and not want to be part of the blessing of others? Now there are essentially two ways to bless others:

You can accept the system and give aid - food, clothing, other forms of assistance, given out of compassion. Or you can work to change the system while still offering support, helping people to have more dignity through their self-development within a fair and just system.

Worship of God means that we desire to become like our creator. So if we are devoted to God, then we must be equally devoted to God's ways, and God's ways are not our ways. Sometimes we confuse this, and we use God to endorse whatever we think is right. Amos challenges that thinking.

Martin Luther King made these words of the prophet Amos more widely known when he declared in his “I have a Dream” speech 54 years ago this month. He said that people kept asking the Civil Right leaders when they would be satisfied, and he said, we will not be satisfied as long as this and that are happening.

King named a list of racial injustices and then said, “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

We recognize that justice and righteousness sometimes get freed up to flow fast and smooth, and other times, like a stream choked off by debris, dammed up by rocks blocking the flow, sometimes get off course or move to a series of trickles.

What is so dramatic about Amos’ words from God is that God is not just slightly displeased, hoping we will do better. No, when we are part of perpetuating a system, a way of life that is unfair, God actually hates our gatherings. God hates our feasts, our songs and our prayers. For God cannot stand for us to be caught up in a lie. As it is said in the first letter of John, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, no in word or speech but in truth and action.” (1 John 3:16-18) And in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20, Jesus makes it clear that God intends to be gracious to all, so those who have worked all day, should not think they deserve more than those who arrived late on the job site. In God’s economy, all deserve a living wage, and in the Gospel of Luke, one can see God’s preferential treatment of the poor and the lost. The prodigal son gets a party while the loyal, hard-working son has to lay aside his resentment and be glad for his brother’s rescue.

This loving your neighbor thing is not easy, especially for folks who have done well, who have been successful, who arrived in the vineyard in the first hour, and worked as hard as the elder brother. They/we cannot remember what it feels like to be a day late and a dollar short. This is a

tough message from Amos, because we'd all like to think of ourselves as just and kind, as peaceable and right. But if I we take advantage of our privileges, while assuming that our neighbor born under different and more difficult circumstances, should simply pull up the bootstraps and work harder, then we are taking advantage of the unjust system and perpetuating it and Amos would speak for God, "For three sins, and for four! How can you be happy to receive so much from me and not give? Seek me and my ways and live!"

Friends, what were the first words out of Jesus' mouth after his baptism and entry into ministry? The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to \_\_\_\_\_ (the poor), release to \_\_\_\_\_ (the captives), recovery of sight to the \_\_\_\_\_ (blind), to let the oppressed go free." He was quoting Isaiah.

Amos reminds us God will not listen to the empty praise and prayers of those who refuse to care for the poor and oppressed. For that praise is duplicitous. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we will be judged by the standard we set for others. (Matt. 7:2) If we quietly go along, perpetuating a system that makes it more difficult for the poor and undereducated, and that adds extra barriers to the alien, the mentally ill, or those with pre-existing medically problems, then we are at risk of building a sanctuary for God where prayers and songs will not make it to the ears of God.

But it does not need to be so. We can re-commit ourselves today to be the missing PEACE that the world so desperately needs. We can continue to work for change to improve the lives of others, even if it means being open to the pain of seeing our own blind spots and seeing systems of oppression that hurt others and benefited people like me. But we how have power can be effective advocates. We can follow Gandhi's advice to BE the change that we want to see in the world.

Our former moderator of the PCUSA, Rev. Bruce Reyes Chow, helped us at the Youth Conference to consider how our language shapes reality and how sloppy language (like calling something lame) can be a micro-

aggression, just as too quickly labeling terrorism with a faith group adjective like Islamic can be. We were invited by Bruce to consider a new way of thinking about the acronym P.C. Instead of thinking of being politically correct, think of careful language as practicing compassion. It is remembering that God loves THEM as much as God loves us. When we do remember to love our neighbor as God loves, to advocate for the powerless, justice will roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Then our worship will then be authentic, pure, and a sweet sound in the ears of our holy God.