

Abundant Life: Justice and Love

Amos 5:7-15, 21-24 CEB

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⁷ Doom to you who turn justice into poison and throw righteousness to the ground! ⁸ The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who summons the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth—this one's name is the Lord—⁹ who causes destruction to flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. ¹⁰ They hate the one who judges at the city gate, and they reject the one who speaks the truth. ¹¹ Truly, because you crush the weak, and because you tax their grain, you have built houses of carved stone, but you won't live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you won't drink their wine. ¹² I know how many are your crimes, and how numerous are your sins—afflicting the righteous, taking money on the side, turning away the poor who seek help. ¹³ Therefore, the one who is wise will keep silent in that time; it is an evil time. ¹⁴ Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so, the Lord, the God of heavenly forces, will be with you just as you have said. ¹⁵ Hate evil, love good, and establish justice at the city gate. Perhaps the Lord God of heavenly forces will be gracious to what is left of Joseph.

²¹ I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. ²² If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food—I won't be pleased; I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals. ²³ Take away the noise of your songs; I won't listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

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Such a beautiful verse there at the end. Let justice roll down... Yes, please.

Although, we should acknowledge that water rolling down isn't always a welcome thing. A friend and colleague of mine, Jenny McDevitt, and I reflected on this passage together this week, trading ideas back and forth.¹ During the conversation, she told me her story of the winter of 2014.

The way she tells it, back in the winter of 2014, she woke up out of a very contented sleep to the sound of water, specifically the sound of dripping, a lot of dripping. Too much dripping. And dripping falling not onto some dry surface, but drips of water falling onto water, meaning by the time it woke her up, this water had already been dripping long enough to make puddles.

It was winter in Kansas. I have never experienced a winter in Kansas, but Jenny tells me winter in Kansas is cold. Winter in Kansas means lots of ice. Winter in Kansas with lots of ice can sometimes mean the entirety of your gutter fills up, freezes, melts, and

¹ Significant portions of this sermon are indebted to a sermon the Rev. Jenny McDevitt preached at Shandon Presbyterian Church. They are used with her permission and with deep gratitude.

freezes, and melts, and eventually all that ice-slash-water has nowhere to go. So instead of staying in your gutter, it comes into your house. By the time the water woke her up, she had not one, not two, not even three, but six indoor waterfalls in her living room.

A kind church member named Steve came over and climbed over her roof for hours armed with an ice pick, a shovel, and a hammer. Afterwards, Steve taught her what he called the most important lessons in the physics of owning a home: water always finds a way—which is not great news for buildings, but it might be for the world. Water always finds a way.

When the prophet Amos was active in the eighth century BCE, it was a time of growing prosperity for Israel. But not everybody was benefiting. The rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. The old systems that had prevented anyone from accumulating too much or going too far into debt were falling apart.

That's why Amos is so worked up. He says their worship is empty and even offensive. God's not upset because the choir sang off key, or the liturgist flubbed the words. It's not that the preacher didn't know when to stop talking (THAT would never happen, obviously). It's not that there was anything bad or boring about their services at all—in fact, it seems like the exact opposite. It was good enough that people were feeling pretty good about it and pretty good about themselves.

We've talked the last two weeks about being a community of compassion—a community where all are welcomed and cherished, a community where we bless and are blessed. In other words, a community of love. But if that love stops when we walk out of these doors in half an hour, then everything we are doing here is pointless. And if we do carry the love, but we only share it with folks like us, in the same situations we're in, then everything we're doing here is fake.

True Christian community overflows with love, and loving our neighbors means caring about whether they have everything they need for a life of dignity and meaning. For God, Amos reminds us, justice **is** love. Everything we do here is in service to loving God and neighbor out there, all week. That's the kind of faith we're called to grow into.

My friend Jenny thinks that Amos the prophet would have loved Kierkegaard the philosopher and what Kierkegaard called his Stages of Faith Development. A truly mature faith, he said, is only found in the third stage.

In the first stage, he said, we want freedom above all else, freedom to satisfy our own hungers and desires without concern for anyone else. The second stage moves beyond self-indulgence and cares about everyone around us. It's about doing the right thing for each other, which seems like a pretty good thing, and is where lots of us stop.

But, Kierkegaard says, there's a third stage. In the third stage we don't put ourselves first, and we don't put right action first. We come to put love first. We don't linger over rules and scorekeeping. We fall into the mystery of God and the depths of love.

We need that. Because if we get stuck in the second stage, just obsessed with what's most right, then our pursuit of justice and love gets really brittle really fast. It splits and fractures as we become convinced that we know the right way, and all other ways are wrong.

The second stage is deeply concerned with what's right. But a mature faith is concerned with what's righteous. Which to our ears might sound like the same thing. Or righteousness might sound even more judgmental.

But there's a huge difference between being right and being righteous in the Biblical sense. Being "right" mean being correct. Which is fine and good, as long as you can resist saying, "told you so."

But being righteous—in the Biblical sense—is relational. It's about loving God and each other. Being righteous means prioritizing relationships. And anyone who has ever been in a relationship of any kind knows that sometimes, the "right" thing to do in a relationship is to give up worrying about being "right."

At my last congregation, I once told them about how I know the right way to load the dishwasher. Never mind that Joseph does all the dishes in our house and they all get clean. In my mind, he was doing them wrong, because anyone can see that the bowls should obviously go this way and not that. After worship Trish came up to me. Trish had married her high school sweetheart Gene more than forty years earlier and they still seemed to genuinely like each other. "Sarah," she said, "let go of the dishwasher. It's just not that important." Which was a very kind way of telling me I was being a jerk.

If we have to choose between being right and being righteous, for the love of God, Amos says, seriously, for the love of God, be righteous. Prioritize relationships—with God and with others. Because that is our best chance at actually seeing justice roll down.

Sometimes we think of prophets as people with the magical ability to see the future. But the real gift prophets have is the ability to see the present clearly. It's because the prophets truly see what's going on that they're able to say what the consequences are likely to be. Amos is filled with chapter upon chapter of woe because Amos is troubled by what he sees around him. But he also knows that where God is involved, trouble is never the last word.

Prophets see life as it is, but they also see life as it can be, when the grace and power of God's love is unencumbered. "Let justice roll down like waters," Amos says. "And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." And for a moment, you can tell, this prophet of doom and gloom really caught a glimpse of what could be. Because water always finds a way.

I am terrified of the power of floods. I always have been. But boy, would I like a flood of justice to sweep so much away. Unfortunately, change doesn't often happen like that. It usually takes longer, which can leave me in despair.

But think of the Grand Canyon. The Colorado River carves away about a foot of rock every two hundred years. That's maybe five inches in a lifetime. But it's been doing that for the past 5 to 6 million years through sandstone and shale and limestone and now hard, crystalline igneous and metamorphic rock. It's not fast, but good heavens, is it beautiful. And inevitable. Water always finds a way.

No matter how we try to dam it, or channel it, or contain it, water always finds a way. It might seem a million years away. It might feel utterly impossible. But, like love, water always finds a way. Our call is just to let ourselves be swept along.