

Newsletter Reflections for August

Sometimes the topic for this newsletter piece is easy; sometimes it is more difficult. Usually the issue is finding a topic. However this month what has been happening in the news has so dominated what I have been thinking about, the problem has been finding a way to clearly address the topic dominating my thoughts in this hostile atmosphere. Perhaps because the lectionary has focused on the prophet Amos who spoke but was told not to speak God's word because Bethel was the king's temple; perhaps because the words of that prophet seem to apply so aptly to our own time and situation; perhaps because the image of scripture as the plumb line that should be firmly in our midst; perhaps because the rhetoric of the world seems so vitriolic; perhaps of all these things, I have twice attempted to write this piece. I find more and more disturbing the tone of the "conversation" happening in this country; it has become more and more divisive. Name calling is acceptable; constant disrespect for any disagreement is rampant. Addressing issues, seeking solutions seems irrelevant. Rejecting criticism and ever more loudly inciting fear and anger seems to be the trend. It seems that things that I once assumed were commonly held understandings and values are perceived from such different viewpoints that real conversations are not actually happening. I see and hear in the news media, in newspapers, on TV and radio, things said which are so ugly that I find it hard to believe that they are being said in the public arena. What is even more disturbing to me is that these strident voices are from ones who hold positions of power and influence; they are the ones who are speaking in ways that demean and dehumanize others. And, even more disturbing is the development that few, if any voices are speaking out to say that it is wrong to dehumanize those who disagree; to put forth the idea that disagreement is not necessarily wrong. By their silence they endorse that those who criticize do not and cannot have anything worthwhile to add to a discussion—that there is no possibility that the "other" side has something of value to contribute to the solution to an issue. Into all this turbulence comes the question of how are we "ordinary" folks to view this. Personally, as all the "personality and psychological tests" which I have taken during college and seminary have indeed confirmed, I am classified as an introvert and am also conflict adverse. In other words, all of this makes me cringe inside and want to retreat. But increasingly I find that some of those words Amos spoke echo for me: The Lord spoke to me. The Lord took me. Amos did not claim to be a prophet, but someone who was a messenger, someone who had been given a word from the Lord. We have that same revealed word from the Lord. It is found in our scriptures. Presbyterian polity requires that in order to proclaim God's word you must be able to read the text in its original form—Greek or Hebrew. Central commands for us as God's people are found in many places. Overall, there are many examples where God's concern for people and their relationships with each other are found revealed in covenant instructions as well as in the parables and teachings of Christ. For example, in Deuteronomy there are many specific instructions on dealing with community issues, among them are those to care for the vulnerable—the widow, the orphan, the alien, those without property in a society where all sustenance derived from property ownership. These instructions are framed using justice 100 times in Hebrew Scriptures as the

key word in English translations. The word justice is only found 15 times translated as such in the New Testament. However, the Greek word for justice (*dikaiosyne*) is found much more frequently. It can also be translated just as correctly as righteousness in English—which is found 300 times in the New Testament. Righteousness: right living with God—or being in right relationship with God. Perhaps this understanding requires us to consider the words of Micah 6:8 (What does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.) My reflection is that in the midst of all the loudness around us, we are called to take a stand for what the word of God calls us to do—to care for those in need—the vulnerable, the marginalized. We are called to express concerns, not to speak in hateful or hurtful or hostile ways. But we are called to say that the hate filled words must be silenced. We are called to demand that caring solutions be found; solutions which allow respectful dignity be given so different perspectives can be heard, solutions that heal the divisions within our society; solutions that understand that the best answers will probably need to encompass understanding from outside the monolith that seems to only hear itself; only feed on anger and distrust. We need to be open to again hear the values which are found in our scriptures which are NOT political, but upon which just and kind policy can be framed.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby