

Hating the One Who Reproves

Today's sermon title comes from Amos 5:10—"They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth." This particular statement comes from the context of the 8th century culture of Israel and Judah. The gate refers to the structure by which judgment was carried out locally. Villages were often surrounded by stone walls with an entrance through a gate. When there was a dispute in the community, the village elders would hear the case or complaint which was causing the conflict at that gate, judgments were made and conflicts were resolved there. Those who came were to "speak the truth" about the issues. Amos in these passages is a visitor who appears in the public square of these villages, or at their gates to challenge their behavior. In this passage Amos is also describing his reception in the villages of Israel where God has sent him with a message that is not welcome. The message he is bringing is the one which opens today's passage: "Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel." Bethel was the worship center that the kings of Israel established when the southern kingdom, Judah, split from the united kingdom of Israel, thus separating those living in Israel from access to the Temple and Jerusalem. Amos was not from the priestly class, but was a shepherd whom God called to bring a specific message to those living north of his homeland. And in the eyes of the Israelites, he was a foreigner, from Judah, that kingdom to the south, so he had no business offering his opinions on their affairs. At the time Amos was bringing his message, Israel was relatively prosperous...at least those who were members of the upper class were doing well. However, as the message Amos brings points out this is not a universal truth for all the people...there are some who are not doing well at all. God has told Amos to point out this current state of affairs; not only that, but that it has not happened by chance but by their ignoring God's ways and God's justice. God calls upon Amos to do some pretty direct finger pointing which he begins in verse 7: "you that turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!" The folks that Amos was addressing thought they had been "seeking the Lord". After all they had built a worship center at Bethel, installed a priest there and saw to it that the rituals were carried out and even attended the proscribed festivals. Yet here they are being told they need to find a new way to "seek the Lord". True worship of God profoundly influences what God's people do during all the days of the week, not just when they are in a worship center. In Amos' day, this type of true worship was not happening as these supposedly religious Israelites had been "turning justice to wormwood" according to the message Amos gives them. So Amos tells them God is very interested in what is happening "in the gate" where they live because it was the key public arena for negotiating fairness, compassion, and social order in the community in accord with the values, nature, and history of God and God's people. The Torah, the Law of Moses, reminded Israel that God "takes no bribe," executes justice for the orphan and the widow," and "loves the strangers." The nation of Israel was to be a mirror of God's justice in its own life and social relationship as defined in Deuteronomy 10:17-18. Instead they had turned God's justice into "wormwood" which was a Palestinian plant with a bitter taste. Wormwood was often considered a metaphor for a poison, indicative of the bitterness of disaster and destruction which Amos feels will come if they do not return to God's true worship and justice. In their case the wormwood was the greed which led to the trampling of the poor, the stealing of grain, the afflicting of the righteous, the taking of bribes, the pushing aside of the needing and finally

the resisting of “the one who speaks the truth” about their behavior. Amos calls them to change and seek the Lord, but there is a problem with this call. The opportunity to change, to repent is only possible when the guilty party recognizes the magnitude of their violations. The words from Amos are not words of false hope when he urges them to “seek good and not evil, that you may live...hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious...”, for these are words of realistic hope that rely on the response of the hearer; of the guilty acknowledging their guilt. As we read more of from the text of Amos, it is clear that those to whom he spoke did indeed hate the one who reproved them in the gate, the one who spoke the truth to them about their breaking of the covenant promises of the Torah. But these are words from eight centuries before Christ, so in what ways does that ancient context have any meaning for our culture? What might represent the city “gate” in our own culture? An apparent analogy might be to correlate the “gate” to courtrooms or legislative sessions. And certainly the role of justice, issues of corruption, bribery in those placed need to be considered. But if the literal gate of ancient cities represents the place of public discourse and decision –making in ancient Israel, could the “gate” of our Western-American culture be the very media outlets that provide information to the people who must render increasingly complex judgments on a wide variety of topics both during and beyond the political season? With the direct access of so many to information and media outlets, the court of public opinion has never has so much sway on the culture as it does now. We could simply view the media as the scapegoat, but the reality and our prophetic tradition does not allow us to do that. We are called to listen to the one who speaks truth—the truth of God’s justice and to be responsible for the decisions we make that lead to the oppression of the poor, injustices of any kind. Amos’ words and warnings have continued to speak powerfully and truthfully across these many centuries. They call out wherever the poor are trampled, the distribution of wealth is out of whack, and justice is perverted. In a world like ours threatened by economic collapse, global warming and disparities in which twenty per cent of the world’s population uses eighty percent of the world’s resources, the words of Amos continue to bear witness to God’s call for a different way. Is there a way for us to heed the call found within the words of the prophet Amos, a way to look beyond the simplistic talking points of social media or the abuse of biblical rhetoric that some have taken up to promote the absolutisms of an entrenched and divided and divisive political fundamentalism, a type of cultic site worship like that at Bethel, which leaves behind those teachings of the Torah which calls for the care of all the vulnerable in our midst? Can we listen to the cries of those who have been marginalized and respond with compassion? Can we seek to right the systems which lead to disparities? When these wrongs are proclaimed can we listen; not hating or resisting the one who brings the message? Because it is always easier to either ignore or hate the messenger than self-examine our participation in the divisive events at the city gates. Might we seek God and live by recognizing the complexity of the world’s problems, placing our trust in the words of Jesus who told his disciples that with God all things are possible. Believing that, there is a glimmer of hope for us that we will heed and honor the words of the prophets in our city “gates” and turn to the Lord: hating evil, loving good and establishing justice in our gates so that God’s reign will come near. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.