

## Whose Word/Whose Place Is it?

The text from Amos this morning describes a dramatic event; an encounter between God's messenger in the person of this farmer from Judea and the priest at the temple at Bethel. When David's United Kingdom split, the central place of worship was the Temple in Jerusalem and thus located in Judea. The king of the separated kingdom called Israel established a sanctuary for the worship of Yahweh at Bethel. This is the site of this recorded confrontation. This encounter takes place after Amos has been in Judea for a while. Throughout the earlier chapters of Amos the message that has been proclaimed is about God's justice and righteousness which are inseparable components of God's commandments. Amos critiques the social, political and religious structures of Israel for their failure to uphold the ethical responsibility they have as God's chosen. In particular, the prophet condemns the social inequity which allows the wealthy to luxuriate while the poor in the community wither. He also criticizes the empty worship that fail to promote justice and righteousness. In our contemporary understanding of the world around us, we often conceive of social justice and piety as distinct practices. In the vision God gives Amos there is no such division. The foundation of justice is the right worship of God, and worshiping God rightly requires the promotion of justice in the world. In the alternative Hebrew Scripture for today, we have a portion of Moses' final address to the people before they enter the Promised Land. This portion of Deuteronomy exhorts its readers over and over again to "obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances." That is Deuteronomy 30:16. Moses continues: "Surely this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away....The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." The people were very familiar with these commandments and in fact, the Shema which echoes this is said twice a day by observant Jews. We often like to think that keeping God's laws is impossible, but according to Moses, it is not. God is not far away but with the people and has given them guidance. Therefore they have a choice to follow God's ways and be close or not. Blessings are promised when God's ways are observed. This is the foundation for the wall which God shows Amos and Amos describes as he warns of God's judgment because the way the wall has been build fails the test of the plumb line. Scripture tells us it is possible to keep God's laws when we love and turn to the Lord with all our heart and with all our soul. Although we prefer to hear and cling to a message of uncompromising mercy, in scripture God's love and God's judgment are not mutually exclusive. God's mercies are meaningless without God's justice. And the concept of justice has no bearing if God cannot be offended when justice is not done. The vision God gives Amos here is powerful precisely because it insists God takes offense at the injustices which occur. It becomes clear that God will not accept injustices perpetrated in the sacred spaces and will not stand for an expression of religion that does not advance the divine demand for justice and righteousness. If we are honest, this vision has the power to disturb and rightly distress, for it calls us to examine if our own mission and witness is in line with God's vision of justice. In Amos' message the priest has heard the news that Israel is out of plumb; the wall has not been built correctly on the foundation of God's ways, and therefore needs to be razed. Amaziah, the priest at Bethel is

prompted by this proclamation to report Amos' words to King Jeroboam, portraying Amos as a conspirator bent on the king's death and Israel's fall. This demonstrates that Israel is indeed out of plumb as King Jeroboam is considered the center of Israel, not the Lord. At that time in Israel's history, it was a time of prosperity for the leaders and their associates. For those without wealth, it was an entirely different story. Amos' was expressing concern about the poor, the marginal and the exploited in his society. He is unwavering in his sense that unless these wrongs were "righted", then there was little hope for Israel's future. Amos has proclaimed that the worship taking place at Bethel was meaningless because it was divorced from a concern for economic justice, especially for Israel's oppressed agricultural laborers. What we hear from Amaziah, the priest, is as clear a message as Amos'. Amos and his visions and words are unwelcome and are a threat to the "goodness" of what Israel is—Jeroboam's reign, his temple, his sanctuary, his land. This "goodness" is condemned throughout Amos as the perversion of justice and righteousness. Such an orientation in anything by the Lord is condemned and brings only death. Amaziah's words make it clear that his house of worship has little to do with Yahweh, but everything to do with Jeroboam. It is easy to support Amos and cast Amaziah as the villain in this text, but closer examination reveals that Amaziah probably believed he was doing God's will by supporting the ruling powers. His investment in the status quo ultimately led him to oppose God's transformative work in the world. This example should lead us to examine our own individual and communal commitments. Whose interests do we promote? Does working with our current political and economic institutions—which no doubt accomplish much good and benefit us—give our tacit approval to their unjust policies and actions? Can we simultaneously benefit from and speak out against structures that promote violence, enshrine economic oppression, and dehumanize various groups of people within our community? These are complex questions and the answers may vary depending upon the context but need to be considered lest we sacrifice our witness like Amaziah in order to secure our place in the world. Referring back to the Deuteronomy text, we can see that God gave the law to be the foundation of a good community. It was there to instruct God's people so they lived as a harmonious, peaceful community, full of the Shalom of God. This God led community would stand out against the pagan narcissism, individualism, and selfish gratification. God's ordinances insured farmers left some of the crop for the poor; laborers no matter who they were couldn't be worked seven days a week or 24 hours a day; and so on. Provision was made for all in the roughly 611 ones found in the Torah. But in Israel, God's plan was failing because of sin and human failing to follow the plan. Paying attention to the actions outline in God's plan, when we pay attention to what God values, we find guidance. Truth is a moral plumb line, Equality is a plumb line, justice is a plumb line, non-violence is a moral plumb line. That we need these moral plumb lines is evident in Jesus' well-known parable of that distressed travel on the Jericho road. That is part of today's gospel lesson from Luke and in Luke begins with a lawyer asking Jesus a question which concerns us all: "Teacher, he said, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This text shows us Jesus' great skill as a debater and storyteller. This question is understood to be a hostile one, as the lawyer was probably seeking a way to discredit the proclamation Jesus was making. The lawyer was probably trained in Mosaic Law and saw Jesus proclamation as a threat, much as Amaziah had. Within their culture the honorable way to respond to such a challenge was to engage in debate. Because Jesus is

God's representative and has God's authority, it would have been dishonorable for him to directly answer that question as it would draw attention to himself, away from the Father and would have been seen as shameful boasting and claiming high status based on his own authority. So, Jesus deflected this direct challenge with questions of his own that both sharpen and deepen the debate; questions that require the challenger and the watching crowd—to make their own assessment; and that use the Scriptures—the already received revelations of the Father—to answer the challenge. When in answering Jesus question about what the Law says with quotes from it, the lawyer has already begun to lose the debate as he has now responded to Jesus as an equal worthy of a proper response, granting Jesus public recognition he had hoped to undermine. The lawyer's response comes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "You shall love the Lord you God with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus affirms this is the correct answer. The lawyer persisted with another question seeking further clarification whether for self-justification or just the setting of boundaries around the neighborhood he asked Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?" Again, Jesus' skill is shown through the story he then tells. This story is the one we know as the Good Samaritan. Within this story of the traveler who was robbed and beaten almost to death, Jesus illustrates two wrong ways to respond and one correct way. The radical portion of the story comes from how it upset conventions about who is the neighbor. We know of course that the two who respond wrongly are the upstanding citizens who pass by; the priest and the Levite. Both of whom are trained in the Law, but although they see the injured man, choose to go to the other side of the road. The one who responds correctly is named only as a Samaritan, a member of the long despised and hated enemy of Jews. This Samaritan not only sees the injured man, but he comes near to him, and then "his heart goes out to him" and he responds with compassion. Acting on this compassion, the Samaritan tends his wounds, takes him to a place of safety and provides for his care until he recovers. Within this story is the answer to the lawyer's question about neighbors. Jesus ends the story by asking: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer, of course is obvious both to the lawyer, Jesus' broader audience then and his disciples now: "The one who showed him mercy." The problem for us generally isn't knowing what we should or shouldn't do. It's having the vision to see the person in need not as a burden, but as our neighbor, to recognize in the face of another their needs not a problem or a hassle, but as an opportunity, an opportunity to show the mercy we ourselves have experienced in Christ. Our problem is not a lack of information; it's a lack of faith to see others as neighbor, others as children of God loved by God just as I am loved. You see, we are told nothing about the victim except his need—his need alone qualifies him as neighbor. This is because there are no limits or boundaries to God's love. And it is God's Word and love which determines who is neighbor. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.