

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 24, 2022

AMOS 6:1A, 4-7 | PSALM 146 | 1 TIMOTHY 6:6-19 | LUKE 16:19-31

In today's Hebrew Bible reading, the prophet Amos addresses "those who are at ease in Zion... [and] those who feel secure on Mount Samaria... [but] are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" It's the last bit of that that's the most important. The prophet wants to talk to those who are "not griev[ing] over the ruin of Joseph."

Joseph, as you may have guessed, is not a particular person. It's a way of describing the people of Israel. And the condition of the people Israel at this time is distraught. It's really bad. There's a huge divide in society between the elites up at the top and the rest of the people down below. If you look at its leaders, Israel looks great. But if you look how most people are doing, it's a shell of its former self. The ruin of Joseph is this huge chasm that runs through the social fabric.

When you have that context in mind, it puts the reading in a new light. Our translation cleans this up a bit, but this whole passage is written in a very mocking tone. You should read it with a sarcastic tone of voice in your head. The leaders drink wine not from glasses but enormous bowls. They lounge around noodling on their harps and call themselves King David. Sure, these leaders will lead the people, the prophet says, but they will only lead them into disaster.

And so the prophet diagnoses what the problem is. It's not the wine. It's not the harps. It's not the beds of ivory, which must be more comfortable than it sounds. The prophet diagnoses the problem as ignorance.

Some of our ignorance is obvious. We simply can't absorb the sheer weight of the world's experience. If you ever want an easy example of this that can also serve as a good prayer practice, pick the countries from the week's prayer cycle—this week that's Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru—and throw them into the news search on Google and see what comes back. And you'll almost certainly find some social problem, some loss, some struggle that you were unaware of. You'll learn something new. And you'll have something new to pray for.

But that's not the kind of ignorance that Amos is getting at. Amos isn't talking about the limited capacity of our brains to learn about the world around us. He's talking about the hardness of our hearts that keeps us from accurately seeing the world right in front of us. To use the image from today's gospel reading, he's talking about what lies "at our gate." The situations, the lives, and the struggles that we know exist in theory, but we fear might be realized if we were to acknowledge their presence. And so we learn to avert our eyes. Or have another glass of wine. Or turn up the music. Even if ignorance isn't quite bliss, it's certainly better than taking on responsibility.

There are, of course, a million example of this, but let me give you just one. Earlier this spring, I was talking to one of the library directors in Bergen County. (It wasn't Laura from Wyckoff.) And they were talking about this program they just started for emerging English learners in their community. This program would make it easier for people to do basic things like understand workplace protection rules, interact with staff at their kids' school, and access relevant social services. And when they first pitched this program, people said it was a waste of time because everyone who lives in their town speaks English already and nobody would go to the classes. You can see where this is going. The class was at capacity after the first session.

It's that kind of ignorance—lack of curiosity, really—that Amos is getting at. Not ignorance of just too much information to fit in our heads, but ignorance bred by a kind of wishcasting about our lives and the lives of people around us. Whenever we describe the world around us with words

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like “everyone” or “no one,” whenever we come up with one story that explains the way our community functions, whenever we just project our own experience onto others, it’s always a good idea to turn the music down and get a little bit curious about what’s actually going on in people’s lives. Because what’s happening in our living rooms, our social circles, or—God forbid—our facebook feeds, might not be what’s actually happening at the gate.

And that ignorance was what Jesus was talking about in today’s gospel reading, too. The wealthy man in this story is the embodiment of what Amos talked about. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” Bowls of wine, ivory couches, etc. And at the gate lies another man who just wants his leftovers.

But the wealthy man is ignorant. Willfully so. Not curious about what’s going on outside his vision. A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that in Luke’s gospel, sin is identified as a failure to be bothered to love. This is a great example of it. After all, the man thinks, if I don’t see it, it’s not real. If I don’t see it, I’m not responsible. The two men live next to each other but live completely separate lives.

And what happens after they die? Abraham comforts Lazarus while the rich man is stuck in torment, a chasm between the two. The rich man has to shout to Abraham to try to get his attention. The symbolic meaning here is obvious, but let’s make it explicit. There was a chasm between these two men in life, and there is now a chasm between them in death. Fixed. Unmovable. Final.

That chasm is what we all live with. That chasm is the hole in the stories we tell about ourselves and our communities. That chasm is the lack of curiosity that only draw us away from others. That chasm is the ignorance that we believe excuses us from responsibility.

And there is nothing that can bridge that chasm, nothing that can bring the world into a single peace, save for the death and resurrection of Christ. The body of Christ holds together all that we try to draw apart. All that we try to excuse. All that we try to ignore. Because Christ has been raised from death, there is no chasm that is uncrossable, no willful ignorance that can’t be redressed, and no narrow vision that can’t be expanded. The one who was crucified and risen outside the city gates brings together all that we have rent asunder. These two men who lived apart have been brought together as fellow members in the body of Christ.

And that same principle is true for our life together as the body of Christ. God empowers us to live as a community of people brought together from across the chasms that fill our world. A community that seeks care and reconciliation. A community that offers integrity and recognition. A community that pursues justice and peace. Because whenever we remember our baptisms, that great chasm between death and eternal life is crossed. Whenever we hear God’s promises to us, that chasm is crossed. Whenever we share this meal, that chasm is crossed. And whenever we see the faces of strangers in the light of Christ, that chasm is crossed.

For in the risen body of Christ everyone is known, every struggle is seen, and everything is held together in a single peace. No willed ignorance. No gaze of convenience. Only the light of the resurrection that fills all in all.

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