

Sermon Series: The Great Ends of the Church
“The Promotion of Social Righteousness”
Amos 5: 14 – 15, 21 – 24

Sitting at the table of a lovely French restaurant, Barbara Ehrenreich was enjoying a \$30 lunch consisting of salmon and field greens, with the editor of Harper’s magazine. An author whose successful publications afforded her a lavish lifestyle, Barbara was concerned about poverty. Poverty was a frequent theme in her writings, even though Barbara herself had no first-hand knowledge of what it was like to be poor. In her conversation with the editor, she suggested that someone should go out there and actually live a minimum wage lifestyle and then write about it. Her editor looked at her with a smile and then responded with one word: “You” (*Nickel and Dimed*, pp. 1-2). Thus began Barbara’s journey of discovery to find out how someone survives on \$6 or \$7 an hour. In three different states, Florida, Maine, and Minnesota, Barbara tried to scrape a living. She found the cheapest possible places to live and took jobs working as a hotel maid, waitress, house cleaner, and nursing home aid. As the book says, “She soon discovered that even the ‘lowliest’ occupations require exhausting mental and physical efforts. And one job is not enough; you need at least two if you intend to live indoors” (book back cover).

Barbara published the results of her experience in the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. As she reports in the book, her experience revealed a side of America that she never knew existed. She discovered how hard it is to find a job without transportation, how difficult it is to pay rent and still have money left over for groceries. She found that in addition to the financial struggles, she experienced prejudice, the violation of her civil rights, and danger of violence all because she was poor.

Barbara talked about how those higher on the social and financial ladder cannot even comprehend what it is like to live in poverty. She said, “It is common, among the non-poor, to think of poverty as a sustainable condition—austere, perhaps, but they get by somehow, don’t they? [The poor] are ‘always with us.’ What is harder for the non-poor to see,” she said, “is poverty as acute distress: The lunch that consists of Doritos or hot dog rolls, leading to faintness before the end of the shift. The ‘home’ that is also a car or van. The illness or injury that must be ‘worked through,’ with gritted teeth, because there’s no sick pay or health insurance and the loss of one day’s pay will mean no groceries for the next” (214).

When she returned to her normal life and tried to share her experience with her friends and colleagues, she found that people in the upper middle class did not want to know that that other world existed. They were blind to the existence of the poor, and they did not want to be enlightened. It was easier and much more comfortable to remain in their own little world (216).

Such was the situation for the prophet Amos. Amos, of course, lived thousands of years ago in ancient Israel, but he, too, was trying to speak the truth to people who did not want to hear it. There are many parallels between society then and now. In the time of Amos, there was a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Those at the top of the social stratum were living in luxury while turning a blind eye to the needs of those around them. And to make matters worse, these rich people were the people of God. These were God’s chosen ones, Israelites who gathered regularly for worship, who brought their offerings and sang their religious songs and did all of the things in worship that people should do. But outside the house of God, their lives did not reflect God’s ways. They were people who did not practice what they preached as the saying goes; they talked the talk but did not walk the walk.

So God sent Amos to indict them for their sins. Earlier in the book, Amos addressed the rich women, saying, “Hear this, you COWS of Bashan.” (I don’t think it was any more of a complement then than now to call a woman a cow). “Hear this you cows of Bashan,” he said, “you who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring me something to drink!” The rich were living a lavish lifestyle, reclining on couches made of ivory, drinking wine out of bowls, and feasting on lamb and fine foods.

All the while the poor were suffering around them. Amos said that the wealthy were afflicting the righteous, taking bribes, and pushing aside the needy at the gate. They were dishonest in their business practices, fixing their scales so that when the poor were buying, they paid more than they should have, but when the poor brought their grain to sell, the scales said the grain was less than it really was. Amos was clear that punishment would come to them for their sins.

As this passage says, their festivals of worship, their offerings, their songs and the music of their harps, could not wash away their guilt. In fact, because of their actions, God said through Amos, “I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” What does God want? That we “seek good and not evil,” “hate evil and love good and establish justice,” said Amos. God wants this: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

This sermon is the fifth one in our series on the Great Ends of the Church. The Great Ends of the Church is found in our Presbyterian Book of Order and is the mission statement of our denomination. These six ends, or goals, are our purpose, what we are supposed to be accomplishing as a church. Today’s Great End is “The Promotion of Social Righteousness.” The promotion of social righteousness.

Two weeks ago we talked about another great end: the maintenance of divine worship. We noted how important it is for us to worship God, how crucial and vital to gather with other believers to worship and pray and praise the Lord. As true as that is, today we learn that it is just as important to live a faithful life outside of church. If our worship is to be true and authentic, we must live out what we say we believe in our daily lives.

You see, the church does not exist just for itself or for its members. The church exists for the sake of the world. The church models the characteristics of God. One of God's characteristics is righteousness. God has always intended God's people to care for the least of these, to ensure justice for all people. This theme runs not just through the book of Amos but throughout the Bible.

The Reverend Jim Wallis, an evangelical minister and writer, said that when he was in seminary many years ago, he had a friend who was "a very zealous young seminary student" who decided to try an experiment. "He took an old Bible and a pair of scissors," Wallis said. "He cut every single reference to the poor out of the Bible. It took him a very long time.

"When he was through," Wallis said, "the Bible was very different, because when he came to Amos and read the words, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,' he just cut it out. When he got to Isaiah and heard the prophet say, 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to bring the homeless poor into your home, to break the yoke and let the oppressed go free?' he just cut it right out. All those Psalms that see God as a deliverer of the oppressed, they disappeared.

"In the gospels, he came to Mary's wonderful song where she says, 'The mighty will be put down from their thrones, the lowly exalted, the poor filled with good things and the rich sent away empty.' Of course, you can guess what happened to that. In Matthew 25, the section about

the least of these, that was gone. Luke 4, Jesus' very first sermon . . . where he said, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to poor people' -- that was gone, too. 'Blessed are the poor,' that was gone.

Wallis said, "So much of the Bible was cut out; so much so that when he was through, that old Bible literally was in shreds. It wouldn't hold together. I held it in my hand and it was falling apart. It was a Bible full of holes." Wallis said that he would often borrow that Bible and take it with him when he went somewhere to preach. "I would hold it high in the air above American congregations," he said, "and say, 'Brothers and sister, this is the American Bible, full of holes from all we have cut out.' We might as well have taken that pair of scissors and just cut out all that we have ignored for such a long time. In America the Bible that we read is full of holes (Jim Wallis, Sermon: "Let Justice Roll," Program # 3410, First air date December 16, 1990. www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Wallis_3410.htm).

As much as we might like to live our own comfortable lives without being troubled about the poor, the truth is that if we are going to be true to our calling to be the church of Jesus Christ, we must work for justice and righteousness for those for whom Jesus cared so much. Justice for the poor is talked about more than just about anything else in the whole Bible. In the Old Testament, there are more verses about the poor than there are about anything other than idol worship, and idolatry often is connected to not caring for the poor. In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses is about the poor. In the gospels, it's one out of every ten verses, and in Luke, one out of every seven (Jim Wallis, *ibid*).

William and Mary Booth, co-founders of the Salvation Army, were committed to helping "the poor, marginalized, hungry and oppressed." They knew that if they wanted to tell them about their need for Christ, they also needed to help them with their practical needs. This

resulted in the Salvation Army being dedicated to what they called the “‘soup, soap, and salvation’ of a person” (Rukshan Fernando, “Spiritual and Social Redemption,” *Taylor Magazine*, Vol. 101, Summer 2009, p. 15).

“Soup, soap, and salvation.” Our proclamation of the gospel, our worship of God, our preservation of the truth, must be wedded with our promotion of social righteousness. Saying, “God loves you,” is meaningless to someone who is hungry or thirsty or cold. But saying “God loves you” with a warm meal or a cup of cold water or a place to sleep at night—that means something.

On Friday of last week I heard Ron Hall, co-author of the book *Same Kind of Different As Me*, speak at Epworth. You’ve probably heard of Ron’s story by now. He was a wealthy art dealer whose life was changed when he befriended a homeless man, Denver Moore. Ron and Denver told their story in the book and have traveled all over the country sharing about what God has done in their lives. On Friday Ron shared something that was not in the book. He said that in his former life, before he became involved in homeless ministry, he used to drive his Mercedes into his art gallery in the city, and very often he would arrive to find this dirty, smelly homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk in front of his gallery. He would call the police and say, “Can’t you do something about this trash in front of my gallery?”

Not until after Ron and Denver had been friends for many years, after their book was published, Denver finally told Ron that he was that man who used to sleep in front of the gallery.

Like those to whom Amos preached, Ron was blind to the plight of the poor. But when God changed his heart, he saw that what he had seen as trash was a human being loved by the same God who loved him (Ron Hall, Epworth by the Sea, August 21, 2009).

“Let justice roll down like waters,” Amos said, “and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Perhaps the most famous use of that passage in contemporary times was Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington in 1963. On that day when he preached of his dream for a better future for our nation and for all of God’s people, King said, “No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," Delivered August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.).

In many ways King’s dream has been realized, but still we know the truth that injustice and poverty and oppression flourish among people of every race and station. We, the church of Jesus Christ, still have much to do.

Think of Amos’ words. It’s a powerful image, isn’t it? Justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. In this community where we live with water all around us, we know its power. Water is a force, a strong force. It has a power of its own. It moves that which seems immovable. It washes away that which is stagnant. It changes things.

Jim Wallis, whom I quoted earlier, preached a sermon on this very passage, and I want to leave you today with his words:

“Because we can have faith and because hope is possible, today we can echo that ancient call of Amos and speak it into a world bound by despair and fear. We can echo the prophecy that says, "Let justice roll, roll down like waters and righteousness like a flowing stream."

“So we say, let justice roll,” Wallace said. “Let justice roll into our streets of oppression and drugs and hopelessness, but also into the avenues of luxury and fear. Let justice roll into the ghettos and barrios and squatter camps, but also into the affluent suburbs of comfort and indifference. Let justice roll into the board rooms of corporate wealth and the corridors of

political power. Let justice roll into a church made lukewarm by its conformity to its culture and made isolated by its lack of compassion. Let justice roll and set free all the captives, those under bondage to poverty's chains, but also those under bondage to money's desires. Let justice roll, we say, this day. Let justice roll and let faith come alive again to those whose eyes long to see a new day!" (Jim Wallis, Sermon: "Let Justice Roll," Program # 3410, First air date December 16, 1990. www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Wallis_3410.htm). In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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