

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Amos 8:1-12

Amos was an eighth century BCE prophet. At the time Israel was a divided kingdom, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Amos, though from Judah, addressed the north.

Though a period of general prosperity, it came with the price of corruption and exploitation by the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and powerless. Amos took it upon himself to press forcefully for the poor and powerless.

As an aside, let's not see this literally. Amos' oracle is a poem. We won't get into whether he wrote it that way or not. Poetry is often metaphorical, which, even in scripture, should be read and understood more expansively than what appears on the page.

Read in this manner, Amos condemned an entire system. Their prosperity came by oppressive systemic forces which kept people poor. The system allowed those with influence and power to "... trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land." It allowed those who could to "make the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier and practice deceit with false balances." The system was rigged to make the poor fall into debt servitude or to prostitute themselves for life's basic necessities.

Amos made clear that Israel was beyond hope. God was fed up with them, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day." (Amos 8:3a) The word of the God would be heard no more.

Though 2800 years later, Amos' words are apt today. We have general prosperity. There are, depending upon the source, 735 billionaires in America today. A decade ago, there were 424

billionaires and ten years before that 243.¹ Though we might argue that an increased number of billionaires is a sign of a healthy, growing economy, it coincided with an economic shift.

Whereas forty years ago people made money producing things, we're now in a postindustrial economy which favors assets over things. Consider where our stuff originates. We used to make a lot of the things we consume here in the United States. Today, they're made in China or in even lower cost countries like Vietnam.

The people with asset income tend to be people who can well afford their daily bread. People who primarily have wage income may be able to afford their daily bread but may not have much left to acquire assets. As assets increase in value faster than wages grow, the gap between people with asset income and people with wage income expands.

I am not saying that the billionaires and those who hold substantial assets, even if they're not billionaires, are corrupt or even oppressors. The point is the system fosters inequality, which leads to market distortions. The pandemic amplified these distortions. Home buyers faced a market where the asking price was the base starting price plus cash premium offers in tens of thousands of dollars without inspections. We're having a problem in Berkshire County with people purchasing property to use as Air BnB rentals. Together these distort the housing market, which make wage income people, people without a lot of assets, have difficulty finding affordable housing.

The gap between asset income people and wage income people has rendered quaintly obsolete the idea that when we work hard and play by the rules we will be rewarded. It doesn't work for someone who got a good paying factory job out of high school and put in 20 years only to learn that corporate leadership found a lower cost producer in Mexico to increase their profits

¹ Willy Staley, **How Many Billionaires Are There, Anyway**. *NY Times Magazine*. April 8, 2022
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/07/magazine/billionaires.html>

and thus their share prices. It rings hollow for a recently retired person whose 401k didn't pay out as expected and rather than relaxing in retirement says, "would you like fries with your order?" a few times a week.

Rising income inequality impacts perceptions. Those who are left behind feel the deck is stacked against them. They may look at people who are economically thriving as evidenced by their beautiful homes, luxury automobiles, or glamorous vacations as having gamed the system. They don't play by the same rules.

The rules of the game changed. The system changed. No one told them. I'd be angry. I'd feel betrayed. I'd be disillusioned. The system didn't work.

Economic insecurity's stress on society falls disproportionately upon people at the lower end of the economic ladder. Many working families barely holding things together are one calamity away from ruin. Years ago, I worked with a veteran in the Albany House of Corrections. He was there because he had a stack of unpaid traffic violations. He told me that they were minor things, like a broken taillight, but that he couldn't afford to get them fixed because taking his car off the road meant he couldn't earn money as he needed his car for work. Think about this for a moment. He had no money to fix his car. He had no money to pay his fines, and he was sitting in jail unable to earn money. Or how about this story. Recently, we had a fire in Pittsfield, which burned out four families. Because housing costs have increased, they were looking at something like a 20-25% increase in their rent for another apartment. Years ago, we did a point in time survey of people who ate at Pittsfield's community meal sites. We learned that on average they were paying 60% of their income for housing. And then, of course, many of us are one illness away from devastating medical debt.

The system is very complex, and there is no single way to rectify it. Meanwhile, our political institutions, especially Congress, are politically paralyzed. Animosity is so high that among some members of Congress, people in the opposition party are not seen as people, which translates to an absence of trust and kindness and an unwillingness to work together for the common good.

That's what Amos sought. The system should have sustained the common good, but it didn't. Today, our system doesn't sustain the common good either. Increasing income inequality increases winners and losers with fewer and fewer people in between.

Economic disparity erodes the ties that hold a community together. Diminished common good diminishes common ground. We, without realizing it, divide into two worlds, which is contrary to our foundational understanding of our nation's values. As such, we become weaker as a nation.

Israel did not heed Amos' warnings. Despite its prosperity, it was internally weak. Within forty years, overrun by Assyria, Israel collapsed and went into exile.

Although I still have hope, I'm also realistic. I can't say when, but should our nation continue to support a system which promotes income inequality, even inadvertently, and a political culture that demonizes the opposition and refuses to work for the common good, we likely might suffer a similar fate. I don't know how long we have.

My hope comes from each of us and our collective capacity to be the church, the body of Christ, who incarnates Jesus when we work collectively to further the gospel's message of a radically, inclusive love manifested through our actions. My hope is that the church will be a refuge in a period of turmoil and that our ministries will remind our families, friends, and neighbors that compassion, kindness, generosity, humility, and gratitude are ongoing touchstones

for our communities and practices of good discipleship for ourselves. Then, through our ministries the word of God will be heard.

Should this nation continue hurtling down its current path and should violent calamity occur, we should not blame God, but blame ourselves for decades of incremental decisions made individually and collectively which might have been expedient in the moment but gave rise to unintended consequences that undermined the systems binding us together. We should accept that there have been many Amoses over the years whose words we did not heed. Should it occur, though I fervently wish it won't, we might want to see it as our national Good Friday, which could be a long overdue national re-examination and reflection. Even on Good Friday, God was present. And as Amos prophesized at the end (Amos 9:13-15):

The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who plows shall catch up with the one who reaps
and the treader of grapes with the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.