

Church of the Crossroads
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 16, 2006
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PROPHETS WITHOUT HONOR

Amos 7:7-17
Mark 6:14-29

This morning, in our reading from the Prophets, we heard about Amos, a prophet without honor. In the 8th century B. C. E., during the long and peaceful reign of Jeroboam II, Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. The military security and economic affluence which characterized this age were taken by many Israelites as signs of God's special favor. These same Israelites also believed that their prosperity was deserved because of the way they had supported the official shrines of the land.

Into this scene stepped the prophet Amos. He was a simple man, a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, a native of a small Judean village. Yet, it was Amos whom God called to embark on the difficult mission of preaching harsh words in a smooth season. Amos publicly denounced Israel for its reliance on military might, and for its unjust social dealings, its immorality, and its shallow, meaningless piety. God shows Amos a plumb line, and says,

“See I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;
the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate.
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam
with the sword.”

- Amos 7:8-9

Amaziah, the official priest of the king's sanctuary at Bethel was not amused. After reporting the words of Amos to the king, he confronts Amos himself. “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

Amos replies,

“You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Israel.’
Therefore thus says the Sovereign God:
‘Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and daughters shall fall by the
sword,
and your land shall be parceled out by line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from
its land.’ “

- Amos 7:16-17

Can you imagine such a confrontation these days between an Amos-like prophet and all those rightwing Christian clergy who are close to the hearts of those currently in power in Washington, D.C? Perhaps. After all, we know about Martin Luther King, Jr. He too, during his lifetime, was surely a prophet without honor, just as Amos before him. And yet his dishonorable reputation did not stop him. He was unrelenting in his words of judgment against racism and militarism in all its ugly forms.

Prophets without honor. We know about them. We know about John the Baptist. There is more going on in his story reported in the Gospel of Mark than meets the eye. This story involves more than just John the Baptist’s condemnation of Herod’s marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. Herod, you may remember, was the son of Herod the Great and was the tetrarch of Galilee, placed there by the Roman authorities. We need to know that Herod’s first marriage was to an Arabian princess whose father was Aretas, the king of Nabatea, one of the strongest Near Eastern kingdoms of the time. Nabatea was fully capable of mounting an attack on Herod’s realm. When Herod married Herodias, the Arabian princess had to flee home to her father’s house. Now, John the Baptist’s criticism of Herod’s second marriage could have provoked the Jewish inhabitants of the Transjordan region of Palestine, fueled by their hatred of the Roman occupation of their land, to rise up against Herod’s rule, and join forces with the army of Nabatea which Aretas could have called into action to avenge the treatment of his daughter.

So Herod, in spite of the fact that he considered John the Baptist a righteous and holy man, may well have wanted his death. Certainly, Herodias, Herod's second wife wanted John dead. That opportunity came about in a strange and almost comical sort of way, through a promise given to the daughter of Herod and Herodias when she danced at Herod's birthday party. Herod promises the girl anything she desires. The girl asks her mother what she should request, and Herodias suggests the head of John the Baptist. And so John is executed and beheaded, his head brought to Herod and his assembled guests, the courtiers and officers and leaders of Galilee.

Mark, the Gospel writer, is revealing to us the corruption of Herod's reign. That a decision to behead a prophet should arise from a promise given to a girl because she danced well reveals the capricious and careless exercise of power on Herod's part.

John is clearly a prophet without honor in the courts of the powerful, just as Amos before him, and just as Jesus after him. For Jesus is also a prophet without honor. He was thought to be John the Baptist raised from the dead. Jesus will suffer the same fate as John the Baptist. Just like John, he will be put to death by those in power.

My brothers and sisters, prophets without honor are central to our Judeo Christian heritage. Indeed, as Christians, we have promised to follow Jesus who was surely a prophet without honor. And now, I must say how ironic it is that American Christianity enjoys such an *honored* place these days in the places of power, in the halls of Congress and in the White House. Many recent political moves on the part of the White House, including legislation proposing a constitutional ban on burning the flag, and also legislation to add a clause to the constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman, are a direct appeal to the conservative Christian constituency of the nation.

One must wonder: What has happened to the prophetic spirit embodied in Amos, John the Baptist, and Jesus, all prophets without honor? American Christianity has surely become a religion with honor. Yet, if Christians do indeed follow Jesus, a prophet without honor, should not Christianity itself be a religion *without honor*? Unless it is, how can it possibly reflect the ministry and mission of its very founder, Jesus the Christ?

The problem is, of course, the cultural establishment of American Christianity as the religion of the nation. When religion becomes culturally established, it is bound to lose its prophetic spirit. It is bound to become a religion *with honor*. The dangers associated with Christianity's cultural establishment in the North American context are far reaching. We need only mention that such a Christianity will inevitably gloss over much of the prophetic literature of the Bible which calls for justice to "roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." It will inevitably present to the culture a domesticated Jesus who is more interested in matters of personal morality rather than the weightier issues of war and peace, wealth and poverty. It will inevitably lose sight of the spirit of the early Christian movement that found itself confronting political power because it owed its allegiance to God and God's Son Jesus, prophet without honor.

Yet, there is hope for American Christianity. After all it was American Christianity, albeit African-American Christianity, that gave rise to a Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a good portion of American Christianity in the north that said no to slavery. In smaller and less notable ways, American Christians have spoken truth to power. I am proud of the bold witness of our own United Church of Christ in this regard.

This leads me to say how wonderful it was to be present at the Interfaith Service last Thursday evening at the Nu'uano Congregational Church. This service was sponsored by Faith Action for Community Equity, FACE, in support of the struggle of Local 5 to win new contracts with the hotel industry. During the service, one after another, representatives from Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities, rose to speak of their support of the right and responsibility of workers to organize and form unions, while referencing the supportive official policies and positions of their denominations. This time, however, the religious community was not just mouthing words. It was putting its words into action as, through FACE, it committed itself to stand alongside the members of Local 5 in their struggle against the powerful hotel industry. That industry wants to keep the worker's wages as low as possible and continue to ignore important issues of health and safety in the workplace. The struggle will be long and inevitably bitter. You had to be there on Thursday night to witness the amazement and appreciation of the many hotel workers who were also present as they listened to the words of commitment from the religious communities of Hawai'i. Some shed tears, including the president of the union. I thought to myself that the prophetic spirit is indeed alive, that we were doing what

Jesus himself would do, and that we could very well become churches and temples without honor in the society in which we live. And that would be a good thing.

Amos, John the Baptist, Jesus, prophets without honor. They are at the very center of the Story that we have been given to shape our lives and the life of our church. Prophets without honor. May we have the courage to follow their example always.