

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Hartford, Connecticut

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 10, Year C - July 15, 2007

Amos 7:7-17 Luke 10:25-37

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WHO WILL SACRIFICE FOR JUSTICE?

Every summer the lectionary has the odd habit of highlighting what are sometimes called the “hard sayings.” Two of them are in this morning’s readings. The prophet Amos is charged with treason by Amaziah, the court priest, who reported to King Jeroboam, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel by preaching things that the land is not able to accept.” [Of course, this is what happens when anyone says critical things of any national leaders even today.] Amos prophesies that Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel will go into exile. For preaching these things Amos is told to leave Israel, go to Judah and preach his blasphemies there. But Amos responds, on behalf of God, saying to the King “your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”

Amos is envisioning a terrible sacrifice that Israel will be asked to undergo because it has not adhered to the principles of justice which God laid down at its founding and to which he holds the nation accountable. Amos has reminded the nation that it has betrayed God’s justice by selling the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals; they have trampled the heads of the poor in the dust and pushed the afflicted out of the way. If anything can still save Israel it can only be by a return to justice, a justice which will require a reordering not just of the moral priorities of the people but in the process their relative power and privilege.

In the book of Amos God is asking this reordering of power, privilege, and morality of an entire nation. At a more personal level we get the same message from the familiar story of the Good Samaritan in this morning’s gospel. The unnamed Samaritan who befriends the fallen man is forced into a situation where he must decide whether to care for someone who normally shuns Samaritans but is now being shunned by his own people. In the process he undercuts his own economic security by sacrificing his goods and wealth *to whatever degree becomes necessary* to restore the wounded man to health. The Samaritan makes whatever personal sacrifice is necessary to do the work of justice and mercy, and in the process he shames the morally upright people of Israel who kept passing by on the other side. In both stories, therefore, whether as individuals or as a nation, God is calling people to sacrifice what they have and on which they build up their worldly privileges and power if there are people in need around them. In the case of the Good Samaritan and of the people of Israel, their money (the most obvious symbol of privilege and power) must be sacrificed to restore the health of the wounded and restore justice to the poor.

The Gospel is clear that the greater the need the more sacrifice might be necessary to care for it. This elemental truth of the Gospel is, unfortunately, being buried in much of the rhetoric in today’s society. Asking those with privilege and power, among whom I include myself, to sacrifice much if anything is rarely done, especially by those who ostensibly represent us in the highest positions of privilege and power. The nation is now engaged in a brutal war in the Middle East which is draining our national budget to the tune of 10 *billion* dollars a month. Now whether you believe that this is a righteous war or

not, the fact is that those of us with wealth and privilege have not been asked to sacrifice anything for it. Instead of having to pay more to sustain our troops and the war effort, we were given tax breaks. Instead of having to put our own lives on the line we leave it to the men and women, mothers and fathers who are dying and being grievously wounded and leaving behind grieving families every day to do our sacrificing for us. Instead of sacrificing from our wealth we were told to fight the terrorists by going shopping, to refuse to put meaningful limits on gas consumption and gas-guzzling cars, just to show the terrorists that they cannot undermine the American way of life. The only sacrifice we might pay is piling up more debt on our credit cards, but most credit card companies will simply extend our lines of credit so that sacrifice won't really hurt all that much anyway. The arrogance of asking people, both soldiers and civilians, to die for our right to shop, to consume unlimited amounts of oil and gas, and to keep our taxes low is a moral abomination.

There is a glimmer of hope perhaps in one other area: that of health care, our national way of responding to those who have fallen by the side of the road and need medical attention. We are being told that the American public is now swinging decisively toward some kind of reform of our health care system so that the poor victims beside the road to Jericho won't be denied medical coverage because of their pre-existing condition or lack of insurance. Almost all the political candidates have embraced at least the notion of reform, though the details are often hard to find. But the one thing virtually no candidate will ask of us is a sacrifice of our wealth and privilege in order to provide a health care system that not only covers the presently 45 million uninsured but also patches up the holes (and some would add the glaring inequities) in the coverage of the already insured. Asking for a sacrifice from us on behalf of those with far less wealth and privilege, has always been political suicide for candidates running for office. We want it all but we don't want to pay for it.

Now without endorsing any particular candidate or platform, Christians can, and I would argue, *must* take their place in the public arena and clearly enunciate their fundamental moral principles. This is not a way of taking a partisan position or confusing religion with politics. But as Christians we have been given the responsibility of safeguarding moral principles, not just for individuals but for nations. We have the right to be the prophets of today's society just as Amos was for ancient Israel. If we can't speak up for the relevance of moral principles we should simply fold up our tents and slink away into social irrelevance. And the most important of these moral principles given to our safekeeping is that of justice, especially for the poor, neglected, marginalized, and oppressed. But to practice justice is not cheap: it will require sacrifice; a reordering of both our personal and national moral priorities.

We need to empower anyone in the public arena to call us to sacrifice because for us sacrifice is not a forbidden or shameful word. As Christians our very being is rooted in the greatest sacrifice of all: that of God's own son on our behalf. God gave up everything dear to him in order that we might live more abundantly. It would be hypocritical in the extreme to live from the strength and privilege of God's sacrifice for us and in turn refuse to sacrifice for others. Any public figure who refuses to address the issue of sacrifice in the cause of justice must not be allowed to use our comfort and complacency to justify his or her "let the good times roll" message of no sacrifice.

Justice is not something that can be accomplished by words alone, nor by resolutions or good intentions or noble sentiments, nor even by patriotic rhetoric. If justice is to be done it will take the personal actions of good Samaritans and the collective actions of a nation willing to say unless we all sacrifice something of our resources then not a single additional soldier should die for a war we won't pay for. Nor should a

single additional person die or be denied medical treatment for our refusal to pay for a decent comprehensive health care system. The question is not: *shall* anyone sacrifice to cure these wrongs, but *who* shall pay the sacrifice and at what cost. And we must act now before the sanctuaries of our own land be laid waste and the high places made desolate. We must willingly bear the burden of sacrifice on our own shoulders. But we can thank God that as recipients of the gift of God's own sacrifice we have already been empowered to courageously confront the challenges that face us just as Jesus confronted his own death and made the ultimate sacrifice for us.

AMEN.

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