

Unfair Trade

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Friday, July 19, 2019

Scripture: [Amos 8:1–7](#), [Colossians 1:15–20](#)

Introduction to the Scriptures

Today we're going to hear scriptures from both the Hebrew Scriptures and our New Testament. We'll start with the writings of the prophet Amos writing during a time of plenty, to his society had a lot of the same indicators that we do... folks were doing well for themselves, but not everyone was doing well. Fair warning, this is one of those prophetic passages that sounds prophetic... just not in the good way that we often associate with that word now.

We'll also hear from the letter to the Colossians an early church of the followers of Jesus in the Roman Empire. The author is trying to call them into conviction even as they live in the midst of Roman empire and Roman civil religion, offering an alternative view of all that is.

In both, listen for the exchanges that are taking place, the "transactions" I guess I would say. Listen for what is given, and what is received... what is expected, and what is delivered.

Sermon

Part of the fun of the summer is that all the activities of our lives empty outdoors into our common experience and hearing: we have fireworks, and the sounds of people walking by the house going "ooh" and "ahh" at the fireworks... we are all much more entwined in the summer months here.

No where is this more true than when you live in a neighborhood with children. My office window at home overlooks my neighbors yard, where there is a pool, and a fire-pit, and a dog, and a trampoline... and so I hear summer clearly as I write.

In the way of kids creating their own worlds in these summer months, then, I get to hear the joy of worlds created, and the pain of worlds destroyed... especially by that most powerful cry of misery: “No Fair!”

So, of course, what is the grown-up response? (Life isn’t fair.) You should get used to it. Realism.

I can laugh until I think hard enough to realize that all the games I play in my life, driving, working, playing... are all just a bunch of rules we have decided to play by... and it takes very little for a deviation of those rules to have dramatic consequences. There are lots of times when the fair games of our days are matters of life and death. And there are lots of times when my inner cry is “that’s no fair!”

Amos, the prophet, knows this. Prophets are always very realistic, you find in the bible, they’re so realistic that they don’t want to proclaim God’s response... which is not, “get used to it.” It is, “a day is coming.”

A day is coming when it will not be this way, God promises through Amos.

See, in the market places, merchants were using imbalanced scales, making sure they only have to give a little to get a lot of silver. The festivals and sabbaths of God were only as useful as the chance to gather in more customers who they couldn’t wait to fleece.

God says, when we prepare a feast like this for ourselves... at the expense of the other... the food rots before it hits the table.

- Generations of racial red-lining
- student debt and predatory for profit schools
- food deserts that price healthy food out of reach

We don't need to look too far for this inequality in our every day lives. We find it often. We find it in generations denied opportunity and generations punished by cultures that demand over-work for under-pay. We find it, even in the midst of this time of need for our new Mainers currently in need of shelter in Portland, in the stories of far too many old Mainers. We find it in conversations which try to lure us into either or thinking that we can only support one or the other: shelter for those seeking new life here, or assistance for those who are currently in poverty.

We find the inequality of equality... maybe you've seen [this little cartoon](#) of three kids watching a baseball game just over a fence... they're all different heights. (Also, see [this](#) very good critique of the same!) Equality, is giving everyone the same step stool. It's great for the tallest one, but the next two miss out. Equity is giving each the tools they need: the smallest gets a taller step and the next a slightly shorter and on and on... everyone has access, but the tools to get them there are different. Now, our inner child wants to say that's not fair... the inputs are not equal... but the result, the actual lived reality... *is, and that should be the point.*

For we are told God's market place is also "unfair"... it is astoundingly, and unashamedly generous to us all.

Into our world, with all the rules that may be broken, all the scarcity and anxiety, all the grasping and the grabbing... all of which exist now, and did in Amos's Judea and Israel, and did still in Rome, and did long before all these... Into that world comes this, "Christ, the image of the invisible God." Reconciling the injustices of the world with this radical act of imbalanced, abundant giving.

The writer of Colossians, then, points out that Jesus came, or was given, not to uphold the pillars of the world as it was then or is now, but to transform and reconcile what will be be... to upend the scales of our markets, our politics, and our lives. It is a act that is profoundly—wonderfully—unfair. We don't earn this gift, this imbalance... it is simply a sign of who God is to us that we would never have to earn this transforming love and abundance... it is simply given.

What is not a given then, is how we will respond.

Can we at least begin to level the scales of our lives so that justice and equity might be in our lives, in our markets, in our systems and structures of community? How do we need to, in each of our lives, seek God's radical unfairness... offering abundance where it is needed, and recognizing that all we have is gift?

May we, following in God's way of radical abundance, help to create systems that create equity, and flourishing, and justice... that all God's people may be surrounded by the love of the one who is for us the image of the invisible God.