

Wealth and Greed — Rev. Denise Stone

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We are venturing into the Old Testament for this week's sermon. Specifically, we read from the Prophet Amos today. Amos is one of the prophets whose book is shorter than some of the other prophetic literature and might easily get overlooked.

Let me give you a little background on Amos. Amos prophesized in the 8th Century B.C. and was from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Even though Amos was from Judah his prophesying was done in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Professor Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, notes that

The time in which Amos prophesied was one of peace and prosperity in Israel. The empires of Assyria to the east and Egypt to the southwest were relatively weak and were not threatening smaller nations like Israel and Judah. Indeed, under Jeroboam II, Israel expanded its territory (see 2 Kings 14:25).ⁱ

She goes on to explain that Israel's prosperity was "built on the backs of the poor." And that "Amos speaks often of the wealthy oppressing the poor."

Today's text directly addresses this theme. The beginning of Amos chapter 8 is a vision that Amos sees. It is a vision of a basket of summer fruit. One would normally assume this vision would be a sign of positive things – a good harvest for example. It is not, however. In verses 2-3, God tells Amos,

“The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.
³ The songs of the temple shall become wailings
in that day,”
says the Lord GOD;
“the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!”ⁱⁱ

Amos' vision is of the coming destruction of Israel. For today's message, we pick up in verse 4 with the WHY of this coming destruction.

Verses 4 to 6 tell us that the merchants and the wealthy have been cheating in the marketplace.

⁴ Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
⁵ saying, “When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel

great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
⁶ buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

The victims are those who are poor and those without power. Not only have the merchants cheated the poor, they have also thumbed their noses at God. They cannot wait for the Sabbath and the religious festivals to be over so that they can get back to cheating. In verse 7 God declares that he will not forget what they have done.

If you read further in Amos Chapter 8, you will find more details about the coming destruction to Israel. The nation will be in mourning and there will be no word from God. It is a bleak picture that awaited Israel. Amos’ words became true when the Assyrian Kingdom rose to power and ultimately destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

This is not an inspiring message. I doubt very much that the people of Israel liked what they heard from Amos. They probably saw him as an interloper from the south coming to preach fire and brimstone to them. Amos called out the wealthy and the merchants for their greed. Verse five tells us that the merchants “practiced deceit with false balances” meaning that

the scales were literally tipped in the merchants favor. God was not pleased.

What does this have to do with us today? After all, this message was delivered to a people who lived 800 years before the birth of Christ. How can it possibly be relevant today?

Let me start with pointing out that this passage is not just about the deception that took place in the market. In addition to wealth and greed, this text is about a deeper, more malignant problem. Amos is really talking about justice and the lack thereof.

I have mentioned on a number of occasions that the Old Testament prophets were deeply concerned with the oppression of the widows, the orphans and the strangers in the land. Their message, time and again, was that if these people could not receive justice, then the nation was not a just nation and was therefore deserving of God's punishment.

It is often easy for us to point fingers at people or organizations that we think are exploiting the poor and the powerless. It would be easy for me to stand up here today and make such stark distinctions that you would all agree with.

Just as was the case in Amos' day, we live in a world where money and power are supreme. The poor and the powerless were and are often discounted or discarded.

You can probably come up with a list of people or people groups that fit into the poor and the powerless category: people that are often discounted or discarded, people for whom the system seems stacked against them.

If we aren't actively participating in the oppression or deceit, we may think we have nothing to contribute to solve the problem. We may think that we cannot do anything about it, that we are in a way just as helpless.

But we are not helpless. We can do something about it. As God's people we are called on to stand against injustice. We are to stand with those who have been discounted or discarded. We are to call out those who live their lives deceitfully and without regard for human life.

Doing something about it might mean getting involved in local politics, ensuring that we are electing leaders who will protect those who are victimized. It may mean we need to participate in rallies against groups and companies that further systemic injustices. It may

mean volunteering with a Foster Home agency or at a homeless shelter.

Whatever you think is the role God has for you individually, as God's people, we are to DEMAND justice. As God's people, we are to DO justice.

Pray with me,

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of your world as your love would have it:

a world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;

a world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;

a world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;

a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.

Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- *Author Unknown*ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4170

ⁱⁱ All Scripture references are from the [New Revised Standard Version](#) (NRSV)

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ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/justice-prayers>