

July 11, 2010

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10c)

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

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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What Gets in Your Way?

I have observed before both how the law will never set us free and our persistent temptation to think that it might. In a prophetic vision, Amos sees the Lord God setting down a plumb line by a wall. This line with a weight on it made crystal clear whether the wall was 'true' or not. And if the wall is not true there are various options available to the builder: see if it can be straightened through supports and the like; or knock it down to the foundations and start over. The plumb line is showing with complete clarity whether Israel is being true to the covenant, and, alas, conspiracy and dishonesty have taken over. Moral ambiguity is a fact of life for all of us much of the time. It is Amos and his family who will bear the visible signs of the faithlessness of Israel until Israel is defeated by foreign powers and taken into exile.

Who knows what the motives of kings and leaders were in those days? They were probably not that different from government in our own day. They found themselves in situations in which they made decisions and all kinds of things got in the way of their doing the right thing. Perhaps they saw themselves as defending their land and their people, when in reality they were acting out of fear, or a desire for power or a need to be liked or some combination of motives some of which were accessible to them and others of which were hidden. They may have even declared a principle to be above all others –“I will protect the people in my care at all costs”—making a kind of law that seems to justify all the compromises but ends up being a prison rather than a means of liberation. And, as always someone innocent bears the consequence in the way their lives turn out. Amos, a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees has a wife who goes into prostitution and children who are murdered and land that is stolen from him as a prophetic sign in his being of what happens to the people of God in such times. There is a right thing to do in the eyes of God and all our waffling does not change that reality.

With Amos in mind then, let us not be too quick to judge the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the compassionate Samaritan. There is a lot going on here about insiders and outsiders, compassion and common humanity, actions rather than intentions and so on. But for today, I would like us to think about those people who passed by on the other side. What got in the way of their doing the right thing and who paid the price for their inaction?

Anyone who has studied and discussed this story (which includes everyone who has ever been on an enquirers' retreat weekend) knows the theory that the Priest

and Levite were concerned to keep moral purity under the law by making sure that they were not made unclean by touching a dead body. That is, of course, possible as a reason—or part of one—but are these characters really that one dimensional? Who among us cannot see ourselves thinking things like ‘maybe this is a trap’ or ‘would I be enabling if I helped?’ or ‘please God, not now. I’m already late for an appointment.’ And then there are all those motivations that we don’t even know we have most of the time. I’m aware that sometimes I can miss someone doing something nice for me because I hate the feeling that I am being managed or controlled. I know where this feeling comes from in my own personal history, but that doesn’t mean that I am completely free with respect to it. If I feel that I haven’t been consulted about something that affects me I can often react irrationally and I can be ungrateful even when whatever was decided is meant to be for my benefit. I can and have enjoyed a surprise party being given for me from time to time, but usually not before I’ve had a stern talk with myself about not being such a fool for being angry before I settle down and enjoy myself. I could easily imagine myself feeling angry with the person beside the road because of my own stuff. I could quite easily assume that it was his own silly fault and blame him that he got beaten up by not taking proper precautions on a dangerous road. And I could pass on by righteously hurrumphing until it was too late to do anything about it. Of course, then I would have to cope with some level of guilt because I also believe that the victim is my neighbor and one day I might very well be a victim myself.

What gets in your way in life? What triggers your own initial sense of self righteousness that is usually a clue that you are messing up and someone else will bear the consequence? I am not usually afflicted with an overriding need to be pleasing to others (although like every one of you I would rather be pleasing than not.) But how often do you allow a deep desire to be liked and admired at all costs to get you into terribly compromised positions where you realize that you are saying one thing to one person and another to another. Perhaps you would stop and take care of this poor victim, staying with him as long as it takes and then being terribly hurt when your husband or wife or your children are irritated with you for not coming home and at least letting them know what was going on. So you missed another ball game or birthday because of ‘pressure of work’. And then feel hurt that your great commitment is not universally appreciated.

You see how it works. We don’t know what might have been going on with the priest and Levite of Jesus’ story and it is not really relevant to the story that we do know what makes them tick. What matters is what makes it so very difficult for each of us to respond appropriately to a neighbor in need. And how easy it is to set up something in our minds that functions like a rule or ‘law’ justifying our choices but, in the end, fuelling our guilt.

When I was newly ordained and serving as an assistant in a parish, I had one parishioner tell me that he did not like saying a confession every week because sometimes he really could not think of anything that he had done wrong. I have not doubt that he was telling the truth. He was a fine man who probably had not

broken any rule that he could think of. But he missed the insidious nature of sin, the self-sabotage and self-justification that allow us to go through life thinking that we are really OK when there is a good chance that we have some spiritual growth ahead of us. That is what self-examination and repentance are all about: growing in our capacity to be generous and free as we are released from the compulsions and attitudes that hold us captive and mean that we miss so much of what really matters in life.

The consequence of the Kings of Israel making their alliances rather than putting their trust in God was borne in the family of Amos. The consequence of the compulsions of Priest and Levite were borne in the continuing suffering of the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers. The consequence of our self-justifying mechanisms is usually borne by people around us, often people we already know to be our neighbors. When our worlds are rocked we can so often lash out in ways great and small without even knowing what we are doing. And someone will get hurt.

So, if we are open to grace we may well find ourselves convicted by Jesus' story and find ourselves once again ready for confession and restoration to newness of life so that the next time we have the chance to respond to others we are a little less fearful and reactive, a little less filled with *angst*; instead finding our selves more gracious, a little more generous, a little more open and a little more able to stand beside those who are hurt without blaming them.

Giving thanks for the grace of forgiveness and the real Samaritans in our own lives, let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...