

**Lectionary 32 + November 12, 2017**

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.

The prophet Amos goes straight to the heart of the matter. In preaching to God's people he forecasts a day of darkness and gloom because the chosen ones of God have long forgotten their God. Instead of keeping covenant with God who gave them freedom and life, they have not lived in fidelity to God.

In the midst of this oracle from Amos, God inserts God's own voice:

"I hate and despise your festivals; I take not delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me offerings, I will not accept them ...

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

God's people continued to worship and bring their offerings to God, but God reached a point of being fed up even to the point of not wanting to receive the prayers and praises of God's people.

I wonder how we hear these words as a community centered in the worship of God. Our festivals are rather important. Solemn assemblies are central to our life together. We faithfully bring our offerings to God. And we make a beautiful noise with songs and harps and organs and drums. To hear God says "no" to all of these things would be rather jolting. Why, what would happen to the church without the gifts of worship and prayer?

In Amos' time that which was breaking God's heart and raised God's ire with his people wasn't worship itself but what worship had become – a kind of smokescreen disguising what was really happening. God's people had abandoned their covenant with God, abused the Sabbath, broke God's law, took advantage of the poor, and were dishonest in their business practices.

Temple worship was a kind of "going through the motions." Israel may have honored God with their lips but their lives demonstrated something very alien to God's desires.

Fed up, God would just as soon see it all disappear and get down to the real matter of being God's people - *let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

This reminds me of the sentiments that have been expressed in recent weeks following the gun massacre in Las Vegas and most recently in Texas. In the aftermath of these

tragedies, many people, notably some public leaders have been quick to offer their thoughts and prayers on behalf of the victims and their loved ones. And this has created a bit of a firestorm. The memes on face book or twitter and much of the public speech have as much as said, "I don't want your thought and prayers." The promise of thoughts and prayers rings hollow and empty and it is heard as nothing more than a platitude or a cheap replacement for doing something to prevent gun violence. A smokescreen, if you will. And this conversation has evolved, sadly, into another debate totally devoid of civility.

I hear in "I don't want your thoughts and prayers" an echo of God's complaint with Israel. "Take away your songs and assemblies and offerings ... but let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Those who are frustrated are saying they do not want prayer they want action. It is, to be sure, frustrating or downright unnerving if the promise to pray or the act of prayer is an empty gesture, a smokescreen for a different kind of behavior, or something completely unrelated to life. And we must confess that it is often the case.

- More than once, a pledge to keep people in our thought and prayers may escape us the minute after we say it.
- I had a friend who, after asking several people to help with something heard each one respond, "I'll pray about it." He became convinced that the phrase "Ill pray about it" was a polite way of saying no.
- I've been privy to one or two prayer chains in congregations that were a smokescreen for church gossip.
- And in our own day, many a church has succumbed to the temptation of turning worship into entertainment. Sunday morning vaudeville!

No wonder there's a perception that prayer or worship are isolated from real life or the things that make for justice. But are they really that distinct? In spite of the fact that we may make those distinctions in our minds or hearts, are they in essence separate and distinct?

I don't think so.

I think in the aftermath of the horrible shootings or any hate filled act of violence, or a disaster or an epidemic, the people of God must pray and the praying leads into the way we live.

The fruit of prayer is love. The effect of worship is justice and righteousness. They depend upon one another.

Amos tells the people of God that they have severed the connection between justice and worship, love and prayer, and mercy and praise. Do we forget too? Do we fail to embrace these gifts or deeply dwell in them?

As the church year winds down this month, our scripture readings deal with the so-called “end times” or “last things.” Today is a great example. Jesus tells the parable of ten maidens, half of whom bring oil for their lamps as they await the arrival of the bridegroom and half of whom forget the oil and while those who forgot go to the store to buy some, the bridegroom has arrived and by the time they get back it is too late. Jesus says “keep awake.” Be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

In the second lesson, Paul provides a rather provocative image to console the Christians in Thessalonica. They need not grieve like others who have no hope. He says this as a word of encouragement.

The parable is meant to rouse the faithful. Paul’s letter is meant to embrace hope. The book of Amos, finally, concludes on a note of hope. In all these instances, the message is to remain faithful in the present. The common thread running through the biblical material about the “end times” is that they direct our attention to today. Here and now. To be hopeful and alert to God’s activity in the world and to dwell in the gifts of worship and prayer.

In one way or another, these are calls to dwell in the gift of prayer. To be hopeful and to be alert to the activity of God.

We need not obsess over the future or devise timetables to predict Jesus’ coming again. Nor do we throw up our hands and let the world go by. We pray and we praise and God, to whom we offer our prayers, shapes us and fashions us and molds us to be people of justice, love and mercy.

It is easy to speak glibly of prayer but God gives us the opportunity to enter into prayer that may be not life-changing *and* life-altering.

Reflecting on the prayers and worship of the church, the writer Annie Dillard once asked, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke?” In other words, the one to whom we pray has this habit of turning the church upside down and, in fact, many of our prayers are pleas for God to change us. So, Annie Dillard wrote that when we come to Sunday worship ... we should all be “wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; [and] they should lash us to our pews ... for the sleeping God may awake or the waking God may take us to a place we don’t want to go.”

Just so, God's work of healing the world has begun and the upshot of our praying and praise sing is this:

- Where there is hatred, God shapes us to sow love.
- While the world imagines justice to be a kind of revenge or retribution or "getting even," God directs us to God's justice: lifting up the dignity of all people and honoring the poor.
- While prayer or the promise to pray may ring hollow, Jesus directs us to the difficult yet richer business of praying - like praying for our enemies.
- And even as the world known next to nothing about the gift of forgiveness, God sends us to be ambassadors of reconciliation

Notice, this morning, what we pray for in the Great Thanksgiving: "O God our strength and our song, you show us a vision of a tree of life with fruits for all and leaves that heal the nations. Grant us such life in you, now and forever."

It's quite a vision. A tree of life for all with leaves that heal all nations.

This is a great picture of God's promised future where the Cross, the emblems of God's amazing love shelters all and heals all. This is more than a day far off in the future. For already, now, this work of healing has begun. You see, God's gift of peace flows into the present. It is made real and when we gather around the Table of mercy to share bread and cup we get to know, ahead of time, something of that day where there are no distinctions, no divisions but all-reconciling love.

God gathers us to God's self to be living signs of God's mercy and justice. So as we wait, we need not sit on our hands. We live faithfully as we wait. God sends us into the world with a holy task. So ...

- delight in your solemn assemblies
- make song and offer your praise and thanksgiving
- offer your selves

for the one to whom we pray is among us keeping us awake to Jesus and awake to the needs of our neighbors. We live as we pray. And by God's goodness we practice resilient hope.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream. Amen.