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“Out of Alignment”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Amos 7:7-17

I gotta be honest with you, friends. After a week like this one, on top of the weeks before this, the last thing I wanted to do today was preach. It’s hard to preach through tears, and it’s hard to give a message of hope when you yourself are in the depths of despair. After so many lives were brutally taken in Orlando, Istanbul, Bangladesh, and Baghdad, and after two black men in different cities were killed point blank by police officers, and after five police officers were killed and seven wounded by a vengeful sniper while they were protecting protestors, I found myself lost in a myriad of emotions: anger, fear, confusion, grief, pain, and loss.

In this state of mind, I turned to our passage from Amos for today, and I have to say that it felt like the right place to turn. Amos, as you may know, was a prophet of God intent on bringing the people back into a right relationship with God. Amos compares his calling from God to a roaring lion, and he soon begins his own roaring at the people Israel for the ways they have turned their backs on the poor and powerless while settling into their own affluent, comfortable ways. Amos roars for justice and righteousness. He calls for the people to repent and change their ways. He reminds them of God’s impending judgment on those who refuse to turn back to God.

Amos’ most memorable words come from the fifth chapter where he writes, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” Few among us forget this refrain as it is used by Martin Luther King, Jr. and

remembered especially as a part of his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and his “I Have a Dream” speech. It is also engraved on the side of a synagogue in St. Paul/Minneapolis, where Philando Castile was killed.

Throughout this book, the prophet Amos constantly calls on behalf of God for justice and righteousness. He reprimands the people harshly for their sinful ways. He does not mince words. He also does not hold back God’s threats of judgment. He speaks a word from the Lord which calls out the people for their selfishness, indulgence and indifference. In today’s passage, he recalls what God showed him in a vision: a plumb line against a wall. You know what a plumb line is? A string with a lead weight at the bottom which a builder or stone mason holds up to make sure the bricks and masonry line up correctly. With the help of gravity, the builder is able to build straight and strong walls.

But God, the builder of Israel, has held up the plumb line and found God’s people to be out of alignment. They are not straight and true. God tells Amos that he will never again “pass [the people Israel] by” (7:8). In this passage, “passing by” is a form of the Hebrew verb *abar* which “refers to forgiving, literally ‘passing over’ someone else’s transgression.”¹ An acceptable alternate translation of this verse is “I will pardon them no more.”²

We don’t often see this kind of line-drawing in the sand from God. We read this passage and wonder when the word of mercy is coming. But it doesn’t come in this passage. God is *that* upset with God’s people. God is done with them. “Indeed [writes one scholar], the Lord will no longer overlook the people’s overlooking of God.” God will no longer tolerate the indifference of the people to those who are suffering, poor and powerless. Enough is enough. God is done.

After the events of the last few weeks, I can begin to understand how God might look down on the world and say, “I’m done. The plumb line shows my people to be so out of whack, so far off base, so ready to crumble that I can’t do anything with them. My people no longer are aligned with me and my call for them to love

¹ Elna K. Solvang, “Commentary on Amos 7:7-15” from Working Preacher – Preaching This Week, http://workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=351 (July 8, 2016)

² Ibid.

one another.” I could understand if God was looking down and saying something like this about now. I could understand. Racism is all around us, everywhere we turn. Our sisters and brothers of color know that they are unsafe in many situations where whites would have no trouble at all. Racism is a part of our culture, our systems, our everyday lives, and white privilege is real. Hatred and fear are real as one group hates another and the other hates right back. We are all guilty, I know I am, of turning away from our neighbor in need, in one way or another, often in order to maintain the status quo, or to keep our own lives safe and secure, or because we are just too busy. We all seek a little bit of our own comfort and security which may, whether we admit it or not, come at the expense of another. We all have judged another at some time for their differences. We have all failed to be in perfect alignment with God and who God wants us to be. I could not blame God for turning God’s back on us. But then again, that would not be God. The God we know and worship never gives up on us, and especially never gives up on calling us to care for the poor, marginalized and powerless. By the time we reach the end of the book of Amos, God promises an end to evil; God promises restoration and repair. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when . . . I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel . . . they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. . . .” (9:14). Our God does not give up on us. Our God sent Jesus, the incarnate one, to walk among us, to suffer with and for us, to die and rise again that sin would not win, that death would not have the final say. This Jesus taught us how to love one another and how never to give in to hatred, vengeance, or violence. Jesus calls us to live out in our lives the greatest gift God has given us—love.

As I pondered the weeks’ violent events and unnecessary deaths in my heart this week, I reached out for the support of a preacher who had gone before and who had experienced innumerable amounts of suffering in the lives of others and in his own life, and who would eventually die from a violent act—Martin Luther King, Jr. I turned to his acceptance speech when he won the Nobel Peace Prize, and I found comfort in his inspiring and hopeful words. I share them with you here today because, though they were written over fifty years ago, they speak to our current situation of violence, racial injustice, and the separation of humanity into factions, racial groups, and categories of difference. Dr. King stated most clearly in that acceptance speech that

Violence . . . never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his (*sic*) understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood [*and sisterhood*] impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.

King continues, a bit later, by saying

I do not wish to minimize the complexity of the problems that need to be faced in achieving . . . peace. But I think it is a fact that we shall not have the will, the courage, and the insight to deal with such matters unless in this field we are prepared to undergo a mental and spiritual reevaluation—a change of focus which will enable us to see that the things which seem most real and powerful are indeed now unreal and have come under the sentence of death. We need to make a supreme effort to generate the readiness, indeed the eagerness, to enter into the new world which is now possible, “the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”¹⁸.

And I would add—whose walls are plumb, aligned, and sturdy.

We will not build a peaceful world [he continues] by following a negative path. It is not enough to say “We must not wage war.” It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but on the positive affirmation of peace.

All that I have said boils down to the point of affirming that [hu]mankind’s survival is dependent upon [our] . . . learning the practical art of living in harmony. . . . This is the great new problem of [hu]mankind. We have inherited a big house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslem and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because

we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other.

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [people] . . . When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response which is little more than emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John¹⁹:

*Let us love one another: because love is from God;
Everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God; for God is love.
If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.
(substituted NRSV)*

Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day. We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. Love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world.³

Love is the key. Of course it is. Of course it is. We know this. And in the face of violence and tragedy and hatred, we can't stop loving. We can't stop teaching love, and we can't stop living love, and we can't stop loving one another, and we sure can't stop loving God. Our spiritual alignment depends on it. In Christ we have been gifted with a love beyond any other. May our lives therefore *be love*—a love that acts, like that of the Good Samaritan, a love that speaks, like that of Martin Luther King, Jr., a love that dances in hope, a love that prays for healing, a love that forgives and builds up, welcomes and embraces, lifts up and cares for the other.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr, in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 1964.
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html (found on 7-8-16)

This is who we must be in the face of such a horrible week, friends. We must not bury our heads in the sand and pretend that none of these things has happened or will happen again. We must bear our beacon of light and love higher and shine the light of Christ into the darkest places on earth. Oh, friends, God has called us to live in love. It is the only way that leads to peace.

Let us love one another. Let us love one another. Let us love one another.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.