

Spiritual Exfoliation
Amos 5:18-24
Matthew 25:1-13

Leave it to the prophet Amos to smack us in the face with the truth. The problem with prophets is they are more often than not too in-your-face honest. Hearing the truth, even when it needs to be heard, is difficult. But even hard words need to be heard. This was the case with the Israelites. The prophet Amos had God's truth to proclaim and they needed to hear it. Over the years, the Israelites had diluted the faith and took more pleasure in partying the faith than practicing it in their everyday lives. What good is a festival celebrating God's forgiveness if those celebrating it fail to forgive others or truly repent of their sins? What good is praising God for blessings if the one praising God treats others harshly? Does God not want us to practice what we preach? Does God rejoice in only our lip service? Of course not!

But lets back up for a minute. Amos starts this section talking about the day of the Lord. Many Israelites during that time, especially in the Northern Kingdom, Israel, assumed that the day of the Lord was the day of victory for them against whatever enemies they had including military, political, or personal. But Amos is quick to remind them that they day of Lord is not a day of victory. Rather, the day of the Lord was the Day of Judgment. This is the day when God would judge the people and punish them because of their wickedness. Ouch! The day of the Lord is not a day of partying and celebration, but a day to be feared.

Amos likens the day of the Lord as if someone flees from a lion and is met by a bear; or as if someone went into the house and leaned his hand up against the wall and was bitten by a snake. In other words, the day of the Lord is like going from one bad day into another. And to drive his point further into the wound, Amos continues by saying how God hates what they are doing:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”

Well, I don't know about you, but my first reaction to his words are probably not words I should say in the pulpit. Not exactly the good news I would want to hear! It would be a slap in the face if God was saying to us that He hated our worship and how we celebrate our holidays. The festivals Amos is referring to are the three major Jewish festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Booths. It's hard to imagine God not being happy with His people celebrating the festivals that God instituted! But it's not just their festival celebrations that God is displeased with. Amos goes on to name several major parts of their worship. The offerings they make are unacceptable and their music is like annoying noise to God and God will not listen.

To pack the punch we note that Amos has shown how God is not happy with the sight, sound, or the smell of their worship. What God sees in their worship, what God smells through their burnt offering, and what God hears from their music is disgusting to God.

So what were they doing that was so profusely unacceptable to God? The answer is multifold. You see, worship to the people of Israel had become a social gathering filled with lots of good food and singing. It had failed to be a time that they put their thanksgiving and energies toward God. It became a party time to gather with friends. Amos says earlier that the people should be seeking, "the Holy One, and not the holy place." Worship had become the social event rather than a place to be with God. Secondly, how the people used the other six days of the week was unacceptable. They may have given lip service to God on the Sabbath, but they did not practice what they preached in the rest of their lives. As hypocrites, they proclaimed God's love and justice on one day, but they rendered judgment and hatred on the other six days. Their presumed love for God did not match their behavior.

It reminds me of this story: One blistering hot day when they had guests for dinner, Mother asked 4-year old Johnny to return thanks. "But I don't know what to say!" the boy complained. "Oh, just say what you hear me say" his mother replied. Obediently the boy bowed his head and mumbled, "Oh Lord, why did I invite these people over on a hot day like this?"¹

After all these harsh words from Amos, we find these well known verses: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." If nothing else, Amos is saying, hear these words: let justice and righteousness flow like an endless supply of water. Wake up and pay attention to your lives! The day of the Lord has not come yet, and in light of how the Israelites were behaving, this was a good thing!

In the same way, the prophecy of Amos is a wake up call to us too! Are we living our daily lives in the same way we are proclaiming our praise? Are we worshipping God because it makes us feel good to be with fellow Christians or because we truly appreciate all that God has done for us? Consider this story:

A rather pompous-looking man was endeavoring to impress upon a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life. "Why do people call me a Christian?" the man asked. After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."²

Like the Israelites, we too could use a spiritual exfoliation. Let us look at our own lives and connect the dots. Would God be pleased with our worship and how we live our personal lives? I'd like to say yes, but I also know that we always have room to grow. Perhaps a wake up call is a good thing when we are content. Perhaps the words of Amos are what we need to keep us from complacency and idleness. God's love and justice has the potential to flow freely through us if only we will tear down the dam that is preventing its flow. God's love may be unconditional, but that doesn't mean that God is pleased with our actions or lack of actions. Let us therefore wake up and direct our energies toward the Holy One and not the Holy place. For it is in God's love in Jesus Christ that we will find all that we could ever ask for. Amen.

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/hypocrisy.htm> (accessed November 1, 2011).

² *Ibid.*

Prayer:

Holy Lord,

In you we put our trust. Help us to focus our gaze upon you and be truly thankful for your love and care for each one of us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.