

## 15th Sunday--Cycle B (2015)

(Amos 7:12-15; Eph 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-13)

I'm often asked is who my favorite prophet. Including Amos (today's first reading) there are 15 Old Testament prophets altogether. Amos is certainly one of my three favorites, along with Hosea and Isaiah. Hosea is wonderful for the way in which he speaks of the Lord's great love for Israel. "When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. ... I drew them with human cords, with bands of love. I fostered them like those who raise an infant to their cheeks." Isaiah is wonderful for his messianic oracles: "The young woman is pregnant and about to bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." And, "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them." However, they, like the other prophets were also keen on social justice. Isaiah, after telling them that their sacrifices are unacceptable because of avarice, goes on: "cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow." Or again: "Woe to those who enact unjust statutes, who write oppressive decrees, Depriving the needy of judgment, robbing my people's poor of justice, Making widows their plunder, and orphans their prey!" Hosea, too, longs for justice. People *like* him because he speaks of love, but his word *hesed*, which we translate "love," really refers to the good that is done to the weak, the poor, by the

rich; understand this when he says, "For it is *hesed* that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

But Amos is exceptional for his single-minded concern for the poor and contempt for those who defraud them, for those who "trample the heads of the destitute into the dust of the earth and force the lowly out of the way," who enslave the poor for a measly debt. The Lord says, "Yes, I know how many are your crimes, how grievous your sins: Oppressing the just, accepting bribes, turning away the needy at the gate" (i.e., the place of judgment). For Amos, there is only one remedy: "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; ... Hate evil and love good, and let justice prevail at the gate; then it may be that the Lord will have pity.

What is the point of my going into all this at such length? The world has had 2,700 years to meditate on these great 8th century prophets, and what has changed? Amos sees the election Israel has received from the Lord as a reason for greater responsibility, as a reason for greater punishment. He refers to them as "A nation favored from the first." In a way, when we see the abundant resources and other blessings bestowed on our country, we could also say we are "a nation favored from the first." But why did we have a stupendous financial breakdown in 2008? It can be summarized in one word: greed; greed which led to predatory lending. Subprime mortgages attracted people who couldn't afford them. Risky mortgages were pooled and sold off to investors. The

lenders now had their money, so that when the housing market tanked, it was the investors who lost. When the purchasers defaulted, their houses were repossessed by banks. The bankers won both ways: they had the money and the houses. We group them under the term "the bankers," but they were *individuals* looking for profit no matter who was hurt, i.e., home purchasers and those who invested in bad mortgages, often losing their homes PLUS their life savings. We can hear Amos saying, "woe to those who make widows their plunder and orphans their prey." To others responsible for fraudulent investment schemes we can put names, such as Ponzi; most we cannot name. But whether named or not they need to tremble at the "woes" pronounced by the prophets.

If the words of the prophets seem to have had no effect, where can we place our hope? Today's gospel tells us of Jesus sending out His apostles, and we know their message was, as was His, "The kingdom of God is at hand." It tells us that though human nature has not changed, God has sent us relief, even though it is of a different sort. It is not a message that will reimburse the widow of what she has been defrauded, but it can lead her (and us) to trust in riches far greater, riches that cannot be stolen. Paul tells us (today's second reading), "In him we have redemption by his blood, in the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the *riches* of his grace that he has lavished upon us."

If you are so attached to earthly goods that these words of "the *riches* of his grace" bring you no consolation,

I have no message for you. We learn that God has "blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens," that "God chose us in Jesus before the foundation of the world." We need to do our thinking on a wholly different level. God sent His Son to suffer an unimaginably painful death and raised Him from the dead for the "forgiveness of our transgressions" and to promise us a glory "that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human heart what God has prepared for those who love him." That forgiveness and glory is open *even* for those who have been defrauding and evicting widows, but who are now repentant; there is one hitch, however: you have to make restitution for all you have gained through fraud.

We are not here to give lessons in investment or even how to avoid being defrauded. We are here to call to mind those words of Jesus, "Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will be your heart."