

*“Who are we?
Who is our neighbor?”*

Proper 10: Amos 7:7-15

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From the Pulpit

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Many of you may be aware, probably underway, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is once again set to raid the homes of asylum seekers across the country, separating countless more families in the process. As we worship and pray today, border security in collaboration with local law enforcement agencies will continue stealing from refugees most all of what little sense of safety and dignity being here offers. Escapees will be detained, mistreated and, in most cases, eventually returned back to their native lands where their very livelihood has been and will continue to be attacked. USA Today headlines this most recent development and suggests “the goal is to terrorize,” terrorize exiles here today while also instilling fear into any and everyone who might of migrating this land in the future.

These administration-ordered raids were set to take place weeks ago but were postponed after public outcry. Now they’re back on, and it will all be done with moral support from the religious right. James Dobson claims that asylum seekers are “illiterate” and sometimes “violent.” Pastor Robert Jeffress says “Heaven itself is gonna have a wall.” Even

Franklin Graham looks the other way, claiming that helping refugees is somehow “not a Bible issue.”¹

My assumption leads me to believe that many of you might agree with me when I say these thoughts, these ideas are the farthest thing from the truth. And it doesn't take a politically invested person to think statements like these are off-base. As a matter of fact, it is not my aim to point to the finger only to those who represent the religious right. Whether we are politically conservative, moderate or liberal, religiously right or left, our self-guided positions cause us to wrong one another in some way, ultimately doing harm.

The bigger point that needs to be made is this: beyond our political and/or religious positions, who we are, how we treat ourselves and our neighbor are called and measured by a greater source. This is the point of both Amos' vision and his interaction with Amaziah we hear of in today's reading.

Amos is a herder and dresser of Sycamore trees. He is not a person like Eli or Samuel who had been trained in God's service since the time they were young. He is a common, ordinary person. Amos lives in what seems to be the good times of Israel. Jeroboam II is a powerful king. Israel is at peace with her neighbors. The economy is good. People are working. Life is humming along. Things are looking good.

¹ *Faithful America*

Amos's problem is that God has given him a vision, and he cannot get God's vision out of his head. Amos would like to get with the program. He'd like to go back to his sheep and sycamore trees. But he can't. He can't because he no longer sees the world the way he used to. God has showed him how out of kilter Israel is. God says to Amos, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel." Plumb bobs and plumb lines have been used in construction since the time of the Egyptian civilization, going back perhaps 5,000 years. Amos would certainly have been familiar with this tool. And he would have understood the implications of this vision, this plumb line set "in the midst of the people of Israel."

Amos, a common, ordinary person like most you and me, becomes God's way to build a new plumb wall. Amos goes to the priest of Bethel, Amaziah, concerning his vision. Bethel, which is translated 'house of God,' was an ancient sanctuary in Israel. This is the place where Jacob is understood to have had his vision of the ladder leading up to heaven. For hundreds of years, people had come to Bethel to offer sacrifices to God and, as such, the priests of Bethel always received a good living from these pilgrims.

Amos speaks to the priest saying, "This is what God told me, Amaziah. The people of Israel are in danger and you must warn them. There will be war, and the sacred places and sanctuaries will be destroyed. The king, Jeroboam, must change his ways or all will be lost." But Amaziah didn't want to

hear these words. If this was true, his own comfortable set up was coming to an end. Instead, he accused Amos of “conspiring” against Jeroboam, stirring up trouble among the people with his accusations.

“Go home,” Amaziah tells Amos, “and tell your prophecies there. Stay away from Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king, our king Jeroboam and a temple of the kingdom.” Which, of course, was the point Amos was making: The place once sacred was now profane; Bethel was no longer the ‘house of God,’ and the people of Israel were no longer acting as ‘God’s faithful people.’ Faithfulness required more than inheriting a way of life; faithfulness demands that we live in that way of life as well.

Amos’ story teaches us that we don’t have to be a professional to be prophetic. All that is needed is a willingness to go and speak God’s truth, speak God’s Word to God’s people when called upon. And what’s more: Amos is able to use his life’s work, gifts and talents to fulfill God’s mission. As a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, he is qualified to determine the health of living vessels. This might encourage us that God has and is equipping us, preparing us for the moments in which we might stand and be used as God’s plumb, prophesying God’s Word.

As we reflect Amos’ story, our reflection would benefit just as well, if not more so, from aligning ourselves to the person of

Amaziah and his position in the story. Amaziah's response - rejecting God's call on our lives for continued status in King Jeroboam's reign - calls us to consider the moments in our lives where our ideas and behaviors are more in line with today's imperial powers. Those moments in life where we succumb to the comforts our political, religious, cultural, ethnic status and other expressions of our lives afford us. "Go away with those things of God and give me my comforts. Give me a man-king!" Amos calls out Amaziah, Jeroboam and all of Israel, and all of Israel is challenged to examine herself in relation to God's Word to see just how healthy their living is and which ideas, which behaviors of theirs are damaging to God's people.

In Amos' words² he offers insight to Israel's shortcomings. God's plumb and what shortcomings Israel is called to consider then begs the question if what we are witnessing today in our present-day living is similar. Underneath the prosperity and lack of conflict Israel attests to is a people who have forgotten God's command to care for the poor, the defenseless, the little ones of the world.

Amos says the law courts only serve the rich. Wealthy merchants are concerned only with their profit and so they exploit the poor. "They trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the earth and they force the lowly away." Amos goes on to say the temples are only going through the motions,

² Amos chapters 1-6 are known widely accepted as Amos' "words," while chapters 7-9 are recognized as Amos' visions and oracles/promise of hope.

putting on better and better rituals, but not changing people's hearts or their actions.

Well, what about us? What about our world? How do our lives hold up when we when we put it beside God's plumb line? Today, we too, are called out by today's lesson in Amos, challenged to examine our livelihood in relation to God's Word to see just how healthy our living is and which ideas, which behaviors of theirs are damaging to God's people.

Of the many pressing issues we can become active or inactive in, I would like to lift up two that are impacting just about every state, city, and neighborhood. First, today's action, releasing ICE to perform more home raids, decimate more families all the while destroying our shared future, tells us much of what we need to determine our peoples' health. And second, in close connection is the recent news of the citizenship question as it relates to the upcoming US Census. These two items together have the capacity to deem us a homewrecker.

ICE has been out in the open, on our radar from the onset of this current administration's tenure. The news concerning the coming US Census, however, may only be beginning to make its way into more homes. Allow me to share a few words concerning the coming 2020 US Census.

Ari Berman of Mother Jones suggests the census is directly connected to political representation because the census forms the basis for how we draw political district, how many seats a state will get in the House of Representatives, how many electoral college votes a state will receive. The census isn't just one of many surveys, it forms the basis for political power here in America.

The fear about this citizenship question is that some communities, in particular, immigrant communities, are going to be less likely to respond to the census if the citizenship question is included...because they're very afraid of this administration's immigration policies. They don't want to give their immigration status data. If immigrant communities don't respond to the census in large numbers, that will shift political power away from areas with greater immigrant numbers.

Representation isn't based on the number of citizens, it's based on the number of all people in America. The constitutional mandate of the census, which goes back to 1790, is for a "just, and perfect illumination of the population." If you have certain groups who decline to respond to the census because they're afraid of how that information can be used, that jeopardizes the intent and purpose of the US Census.

In North Carolina, Thomas Hofeller drove redistricting in many swing states, and says this of the 2020 US Census in relation to adding the citizenship question: adding the

citizenship question would be clearly disadvantageous to democrats and an advantage to republicans and non-Hispanic whites. This would be a radical departure from the one person, one vote standard the Supreme Court issued in the 1960s. He essentially is saying the purpose of the citizenship question is to try to draw districts to help republicans and whites. This may have been the thought all along, however, now with Hofeller's research being made public, there can be no doubt.

If citizenship is used to determine political representation that means that people who are living here legally, people who have green cards, people who are working and paying taxes would have no representation, and the places where they lived wouldn't get federal funds (certain federal funds are apportioned to states according to how many people are there). In fact, people who are citizens would be impacted by this decision if they live in heavily populated non-citizen areas/states. LA, NYC, Houston, and Dallas would get less money, less political power, less representation. Even within states, a noticeable power shift would take place to depress response to immigrant communities, and enshrine white political power.³

Both of these issues are big, big, big determinants in the course of discovering who we might become. If God's people are going to be set straight in order to all become God's people, we have on our hands two serious questions that need

³ Information regarding 2020 Census and the citizenship question is offered by *Mother Jones* journalist Ari Berman

answering and they are both identity questions: (1) in relation to the US Census and the citizenship question: who are we as a people, and (2) is in relation to ICE and its raid of immigrants here: who is our neighbor? Will we hold on to or relinquish the ideas of Amariah, who rejects God's plumb-built wall to maintain secular status? When called upon, will we stand up and share God's Word to and for God's people, so that God's love, justice and mercy might be known throughout all creation? Will we allow God's Word to build us up? The choice is ours. Amen.