

A sermon delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 26, November 17, 2013, in great sadness, dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Brenda Stiers, a friend and colleague for 31 years, and all her life, a light of God shining in the darkness of this world and always to the glory of God!

“Horizons to Heights: The Dynamism of Art and Social Justice”

Amos 5:18-24; Luke 21:5-19

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and salvation. Amen.

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Amos was a “middle man” in the sheep herding business of Tekoa. He was a little man to whom no one paid much attention – sort of a Walter Mitty type. Sometime in the Autumn of say, 755 B.C., Amos became a prophet of God. He starts speaking. And as he speaks, it becomes clear to all around that God is still speaking....again.

Amos stops by a worship center (you know one of those prefab buildings in the desert) probably the place called Bethel, and unloads his brutally frank **“Word of the Lord,”** message - totally rejecting the worship of the people. Clearly, the Lord despises and **hates** the people's feasts, their solemn assemblies, their burnt offerings, their cereal offerings, their peace offerings, their noise and melody. God take it anymore. God disdains their smells and bells, the sights and the sounds of their worship. Through Amos’ words, God cleanses the sensory nightmare his people offered as worship. In a translation of Amos 5:21-24 by Eugene Peterson, we read:

21-24 "I can't stand your religious meetings.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
your public relations and image making.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
When was the last time you sang **to me?**
Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want."

Through Amos, God makes it quite clear that what the Creator of the Universe and each living creature on earth REALLY seeks is justice and righteousness as true worship! God says that there was no communion with the Holy One, only commotion in the Holy Place and God says, "Get rid of this garbage." More pointedly, through Amos, God said, "**let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.**"

We are here today, because **God is still speaking.** And God is still seeking – justice and righteousness for ALL God's people.

God's justice has three dimensions. First, God's justice is **dynamic.** It is not the justice which balances scales judiciously - as portrayed by the blindfolded "lady Liberty" holding the scales of justice. God's justice is the moving, torrential justice that rushes down until injustice is swept away! The prophetic justice of God is never at rest. It is moving forward in power and in truth. It will not be silenced, neither will it be subdued. *God's justice is dynamic.*

Second, **God's justice expects a response** to what God has done for the people of God. Doing justice is what you and I **are expected to do for God.** The pattern of divine indicative followed by expected human response runs throughout the Bible. For example, God delivers the Chosen People out of bondage and in so doing God lays out expectations for them in the Ten Commandments. In the letter to the Romans, Paul begins with an

exposition of the gospel in chapters 1-11, followed by expected responses to the imperatives of God's good news in chapters 12-16. In Colossians, the meaning of the Christ event is explained from the first verse of chapter one through 3:4 with imperatives following in the rest of the letter. In the words of I John 4:19: "*We love, because God first loved us!*" **Our God expects love and justice as our response to what God has done for us!**

Finally, to do justice means to change the world. One of my professors, Dr. Cornel West says it best: "*Justice is what love looks like in public.*" Justice fights for the poor. In Amos, Isaiah, Deuteronomy, and throughout Hebrew Scriptures, "to seek justice" means to fight for the poor, the orphan, and the widow. When the prophets of old speak of justice, there is nothing theoretical, nothing philosophical, and nothing even legal in their notions. Justice is not a pipe dream. Justice is what is commanded - what is expected.

And the prophets of old are with us still! In their new manifestation, God is still speaking in the prophets of our times who lead us out of the halls of worship into quarters of the city where the poor live. They demand that we get close enough to the eyes of the lonely widow, the hurting orphan, the hungry and homeless man – so that we may see them- not look through them.

As 30 of us witnessed on Tuesday night as over 550 BREAD members filled our sanctuary, the cries of prophets in our times can be heard in the voice of a Linden mother who looked into the eyes of murdering thief with gun in hand as she was taking out the garbage this summer. There in the back alley, gun in hand he looked her in the eye – just before taking off down the alley. He later learned that he had killed her neighbor. We heard their crying out to us in the voice of a local rabbi telling the painful stories of children in his synagogue who took their lives because of depression and mental illness. They called to us once again to listen to and respond to the 268,000 citizens of our county who were born in a foreign country but call Columbus their home – yet find themselves struggling to gain fair and equitable treatment in this, their new homeland.

They call to us to see and respond to the abused and neglected children, our unjustly treated LGBT members and friends, the forsaken, the forlorn, and the forgotten ones of our community. And they say to us now and forevermore, "**Justice now! Justice always! Let justice roll down like an ever flowing stream!**" **Yes, God is still speaking!**

My mentor, The Rev. Dr. William Sloan Coffin once said, "*When the rich take from the poor, it's called an economic plan. When the poor take from the rich, it's called class warfare. It must be wonderful for the rich to deplore class warfare while making sure their class always wins.*" You and I need to remember that "Not to take sides is effectively to weigh in on the side of the stronger" (also Coffin).

In the end, it's not enough to just read the Bible. It's not enough to offer clear and concise exegetical references and interpretations, so that folks nod in agreement (or perhaps nod off in catatonic sleep state).

God knows that people need fulfillment of scripture. God knows, people need the Spirit upon them and within them. God knows the poor need good news! God knows, people need to be healed of the pain they carry around daily from losses they have experienced, from depression they have battled, from injuries they have sustained in life's walk. God knows, people need forgiveness of sins, forgiveness of debts, forgiveness of burdens, and forgiveness of foolish words spoken and strange behaviors acted upon. God knows, people need to be released from captivity - whether physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional. God knows, those blinded, for whatever reason need to see again. God knows, the Spirit of God is needed for fulfillment - not just one more reading of one more ancient text. *God is still speaking!* God will not be silent. God will not sit down and turn God's head and turn away from the needs of God's children.

And wherever, and whenever, and however justice is done, the garbage of injustice is washed away, healing and forgiveness

happen, captives are released, the blind see again, the joy of Jubilee is fulfilled and the beautiful feet of the prophets take to the streets, the plains, the sea sides, and the mountaintops of this world. When this happens, **God is still speaking.**

Isaiah 40:21-22 asks, *"Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth . . . and God who makes the rulers of the earth for nothing."* In answering the prophet's questions, you and I must always remember we have a legacy to uphold at First Church. We were birthed in resistance to the cruel injustice of slavery. Yes, our legacy is rooted in justice action with the enslaved, with the poor, and with the dispossessed. Our birth story must always be embraced by beauty – by the all embracing "strength and beauty" we experience in the awesome grandeur of our Gothic Cathedral of Grace.

But, it is not just a cathedral of grace. This is the house that Justice built. Here Art and Justice embrace. Here Beauty encounters the Beasts of our generation and forces surrender. Here our beautiful savior who walks, talks, and lives with us on the plain of our existence encounters the soaring heights of our heavenly calling. Horizons meet heights in our legacy of beauty and justice – they intersect in the cross of Christ. And it is in the nexus of suffering and glory; justice and beauty that we see the face of God.

In a recent article in *Wired*, artist Jonah Lehrer speaks to art and social justice with these words. Jonah says it is beauty that embraces art and social justice. He writes:

"Beauty keeps us engaged, via bodily sensation, an internal thrill, and the experience of the hairs on the back of our neck standing up. Through our art, whether painting, song or dance, we offer up the beauty we discern where it isn't usually seen and offer others the hint that they can complete the work by stepping into it. We draw attention to something others see as a social problem and our art says: but also this, also beauty... Instead of turning

away in frustration or leaping to quick fix answers might we offer a third path, a path into the appreciation of a phenomenon? ... We turn longing into art and art into justice.”

It is never either/or. It is always both/and. Horizons and Heights. Justice and Art - Beauty embracing the totality of life. And in the end, the prophets of God – whether a middle management sheep herder from the Tekoa or THE Good Shepherd himself from the Sleepy town of Nazareth – will demand that we live our faith as God’s co-creators of justice and peace; or art and beauty.

Like Amos, there was another small-boned, big hearted prophet of who changed the world in his time. A 5’3” Hindu named Mahatma Gandhi changed the world through the power of nonviolent resistance. He spoke in the spirit of God, giving clear marching orders for everyone. But, I hear his charge to us as Christians. Mahatma Gandhi said, **“Live like Jesus did and the world will change.”** Amen.

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