

# “The Word of God is Living and Active”

Amos 5:6-7,10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

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The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

## **“The Word of God is Living and Active”**

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 13, 2024, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Calvin Roetzel, David Hopper, Margaret Farley, David Kelsey, Jeffery Rowthorn, Letty Russell, Cornel West, Henri Nouwen, Bonnie Kittell, Brevard Childs, Robert Wilson, Abraham Malherbe, Richard Hays, Leander Keck, and Walter Brueggemann and always to the glory of God!

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

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September 1982 was a great month in my life. Three amazing events happened 42 years ago in September. I met my future wife at a Global Missions Meeting of the Board for World Ministries in Cleveland, Ohio. I worshiped in the church that would become the congregation to call me into ministry – also in Cleveland. And I was blessed to be a first semester student in Dr. Bonnie Kittell’s Introduction to the Old Testament at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Kittell was the first woman professor of the Hebrew Scripture since Yale opened in 1701 – count it – that is 281 years. She was clear. She was tough. She was funny. She was brilliant.

Over the next couple of years I would come to know she was a survivor and resilient as she battled through stage-4 pancreatic cancer and returned to teach – dying just weeks before our class graduated in the spring of 1985.

The first day of class, she said, “Please listen carefully to what I am about to say. Place both your hands on the Bible. Before you open your Bible and begin studying God’s word, I want you to pause. I want you to meditate in silence and I want you to consider the gravity of what you are about to do. The Word of God has been with us for thousands of years. It is ancient. It is beautiful. It is sacred. It is blessed. And it’s confounding. We will be digging into God’s word, dissecting God’s word. We will do it word by word, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book. But, you are not archeologists. You are not surgeons. You are not scientists. You are theologians. You have been blessed by God to take care of God’s Holy Word. So, never open the Bible without a prayer. Always ask God to help you, to guide your heart and mind, and always humbly accept the power of God’s Word given unto your care.”

We all were afraid to do the next thing and open the Bible. With that prayerful admonition, we opened our Bibles that day. From Genesis through Malachi, Dr. Kittel opened us to a deeper understanding of the first 39 books of the Bible. We were taught how to read God’s Holy Word – at least how to read God’s word if you are going to Yale. We were taught to do so with awe and holy admiration and holy adoration, with love and care; and with a critical eye and a discerning mind.

That is a lot to hold onto when you are holding a book which literally means “Little Books.” It contains 66 books, with 1189 chapters and 31,102 verses – and at least 783,137 words of God (depending on which one of the more than 450 known version you are using). And it is brought to us from a multiple range of languages that include ancient Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew. And a range of varying sources – some that we know and some that we don’t know.

Reading the Bible is very much like looking through a kaleidoscope. When you look through a kaleidoscope, you see a vast array of design, colors and shapes. Depending on the light, and how you hold it up to the light, it also changes. And it is different every time. That’s what the Bible is like – like a

kaleidoscope – different each and every time you open the pages and God’s light shines through to you.

In the midst of this vast collection of books, chapters and verses come three voices to us today – Amos, an unknown author of Hebrews and Mark.

In Hebrews, the complexity and challenge of God’s Word come together in one verse: *“Indeed, the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* God’s Word is not some dusty, broken old ancient mythological beast. It is Living and Alive! However, we can’t just sit and bask in “living and alive” – we move to a sword with two edges – cutting the soul from the spirit; the joints from the marrow. God’s word is not some playful toy. It is a weapon which judges – the very thoughts and intentions of the heart of the reader and listener.

As with so many Biblical verses, you can’t pick and choose the first part of a sentence from the second part – but we do it anyway. We are audacious enough to disrespect the language of this and other letters; this and other laws, mandates, parables and more. But, as we also know, the text is literally sown together – and we have to look at what was said previously as well as what follows. In the preceding passage, Hebrews 4:1-11, the author builds off of Psalm 95 to show that we enter into God’s rest when we receive God’s Word. So, the author is challenging God’s people to continue to be faithful, to be discerning, judging and probing with God’s Holy Word – so verse 12 and 13 express warning as well as thanksgiving and praise. It is complicated. We are held to account when we step into God’s Word. All of us – not just the preachers. Although as you read the book of James you will see that preachers have burning coals heaped on them if they screw this up. So it’s a little bit more challenging when we have the audacity to step ten feet higher than you and say we know what we are talking about.

In a world which seems too often to have little regard for the sanctity and power of words to destroy, we are warned that God’s word can pierce

and embrace. It can lead to greater faithfulness or cut you down in your insincerity. The Bible should come with a warning on the front – don't mess with the Word of God. Don't mess with that which doesn't trifle.

Then there is Amos and the sixteen Hebrew Scripture prophets (12 have books named after them). Somewhere in the Autumn of 755 BCE, the prophet Amos was stepped into God's Word delivered for all of us. He was a farmer. He was actually in middle management for sheep herding. He was speaking God's Word even though he didn't want to. He was speaking God's word to people who refused to listen. Stopping by a worship center, probably the place called Bethel, and unloading his brutally frank "Word of the Lord," Amos' message totally rejected the worship of the people. Clearly, the Lord despised and hated the people's feasts, their solemn assemblies, their burnt offerings, their cereal offerings, their peace offerings, and their melody and noise (can you hear all the noise?).

God disdained the sights, the smells, the words and the sounds of their worship. Through Amos, God cleansed the sensory nightmare his people offered as worship. God sought justice and righteousness as true worship! God saw that there was no communion with the Holy One, only commotion in the Holy Place and the Lord said, "I am putting an end to this garbage."

God spoke through the prophets of old. Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps the greatest Biblical scholar of Hebrew Scripture and certainly the author of the most profound and powerful book on the prophets – in his epic *The Prophets*, wrote:

*"The prophet is a person who sees the world with the eyes of God, who holds God and humanity in one thought, at one time, in all times." Heschel continues: "The passion of God is speaking when the prophet speaks. . . . He feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned by humanity's fierce greed. . . . Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and humanity (man). God is raging in the prophet's words*

. . . *the prophet seldom tells a story, but casts events. . . He lives in sympathy with the divine pathos.*” (Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1962, pp. 3-6).

God’s justice – spoken through the prophets – has three dimensions.

**First, God’s justice is dynamic.** It is not the justice which balances scales judiciously – as portrayed by the blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice. God’s justice is moving. It’s torrential. It rushes down until injustice is swept away! It is God’s voice “lent to the silent agony” of this world. God’s justice is never at rest. It is moving forward in power and in truth. It cannot and will not be silenced, neither can it be subdued. God’s justice is always dynamic.

**Second, God expects justice as the response to what God has done for people.** Simply stated, 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 suggestions for the expected response to that 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. This is the way it works. God expects justice as our response to what God has done for us! “*We love,*” says, I John 4:19, “*because God first loved us!*” See how that works? It is a response.

**Third, God’s justice requires action.** This is big for God! God’s justice is never still. To do justice is to act as advocates and defenders of the powerless. In Amos, Isaiah, Deuteronomy, and throughout Hebrew scriptures, “to seek justice” means to advocate on behalf of the poor, the orphan, and the widow. In the prophets of Old, the justice bringers, there is nothing theoretical, nothing philosophical, nothing even legal in their notions.

The spirit of prophets of old still reigns today. 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 to help those most in need. They command us to look into the eyes of the lonely widow and the hurting orphan. They demand that we listen to and respond to the medically fragile, the housing unstable and the food denied sisters and brothers at our doors and lost on the streets of our villages, towns and cities. Most importantly, the prophets demand that we see and respond to the abused and neglected child, the unfairly paid immigrant, the forsaken, the forlorn, and the forgotten. We have to see those in need and respond as powerful people for God.

The prophets of our times say to us now and forevermore, “Justice now! Justice always!” In Amos’ words, God proclaims, “Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream!” God is still speaking through prophets of our time.

Finally, the Bible is filled with narratives and stories which teach – point blank – that God’s word is Living and Active. Jesus – in Mark’s Gospel – takes no prisoners. Jesus is approached by a rich person. As far as we know, this man was dressed nicely for Sunday worship – as we would do in a Protestant Church. He is the product of a religious heritage. He is prosperous. He is sincere. All of these are admirable qualities. (Again – remember that we have just come from the children in Mark 10:13-16 who had nothing – no rights and no recognition).

We have three conversations ensue. Jesus talks with the rich man; with his disciples and finally with Peter – all three conversations involve money. The rich man is not a caricature. He is sincere. He has lived faithfully and well all his life. He has kept the commandments. He has honored God. He is not arrogant, and he is not presumptive. Jesus does not mock him and neither should we. Jesus looks at him and loves him (it says in verse 21). Jesus never rebukes him or discipline him. He loves him.

Jesus simply wants him to discover his reason to live. He wants him to sell what he owns, to share it with the poor and come and follow Jesus. Jesus is

actually inviting him to be his disciple. He wants him to walk with him. He wants him, this rich man, to walk with him and share in his ministry. The rich man cannot and will not do this and walks away sad. He won't inherit eternal life through following this pathway to heaven. His possessions, his things prevent him from God's calling in Jesus Christ to follow.

Here again, this story of the rich man stands as a disturbing truth of the Gospel – one that focuses on all of our possessions and what we do with them – knowing we can't take them with us when we are gone. But, through it all, I want us to hang on to the love of God in Jesus – as I remind you once again – that Jesus loves this man. He speaks to him out of love – not judgement. Here the sword that cuts two ways is one offered in the fullness of love.

Throughout my life, I have been blessed with great teachers of the Bible. One of my greatest teachers of the Bible (who has now become a friend) has been Walter Brueggemann. Although I was not a student in his classroom, I have read many of his 60+ books. I listened to him lecture, spent time one-on-one with him and of course here at First Church learned from him as our Gladden Lecturer.

Now 91, Walter's describes his teaching this way. He says, "I was a patient teacher. I would slow down and walk them through the text. Seeing justice in the entire Bible is not only legitimate, it is inescapable...Once you understand class conflict, the Bible is all about the 'haves' and the 'have nots.'" He continues, "Prophetic imagination is the capacity to entertain a world other than the one that is in front of us. It seems to me, that is exactly what the Bible wants us to do. It invites us to host a world other than the one we see."

Walter says, "justice is the task of apportioning the abundant common good so that every member can live a life of dignity and security. It is distributive justice. The great justice story is the Manna story in which the abundant common good is available to all, but it cannot be stored up. Jesus in the two feeding miracles reiterates the Manna Story. Holy Communion reiterates

the Manna Story. The accent of creation faith is on the abundance of God which contradicts the programmatic scarcity of the Capitalistic system. While it wasn't capitalism, the adversaries of the prophets all lived by the scarcity system. We are all schooled in the scarcity system." What makes Walter angry is to witness injustice in our time. He said, "injustice is the eclipse of human connectedness in the service of fear and greed. This has many manifestations. How can we be so obtuse to engage in so much self-destruction when we know better? How can we be so self-serving in so many shameless ways? In the words of Jeremiah, 'you know longer know how to be ashamed.' If you no longer know how to be ashamed, school is out."

Walter Brueggemann is a teacher who shows us that in every verse of the Bible justice is at work. Justice is not an afterthought. It is not a half-way thought. It is about bringing together all of us. It is about showing us a better way – with a world view of abundance for all not scarcity for all.

Like Brueggemann and many others, I have always taken the Bible seriously. I have never taken it literally. And for those of you who were raised in a place where the Bible was to be taken literally...I am sorry. I am truly sorry. I am sorry because it kept you as a young child from experiencing the imagination of God that is at work all the time in the life that we have. It kept you from a healthy vision of God to simply love God and love your neighbor. Literal interpretation of scripture always gets you tied up in "Nots." Ultimately, the Bible is about this. If it is living and being active, it is about you. It is about you. You become God's Word as you live within this word. It's not a thing that's in a book. It is not a thing beyond us. It is actually within us. We become the living breathing word of God.

Psalm 119:105 guides you to Seek. It calls you to follow God's Word: "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path." May God's Word – always and forever inspire us as to be Living and Active and to follow the words which Micah invites us into. His words are a way of life and living. He calls us to "do justice, love tenderly and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). Amen.

