Sermon - The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 21C
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
September 25, 2016

Amos 6:1-7
Psalm 146
I Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

“You ... put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence”¹ says Amos to the upper crust of Israel in a verse that the lectionary framers omitted from today’s reading. The day of evil is prophetic code speak for the day of God’s reckoning, when God would avenge the reign of violence they had brought about. Violence in the prophets is a very narrow term that refers to abuse by royals and economic elites of those who were defenseless:² the poor and needy, afflicted, widows, immigrants, and orphans.³ These are protected classes in the Law of Moses,⁴ thus why Father Abraham can chide the rich man in our gospel today: “They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them...”⁵ So let’s be very clear: the prophets’ problem is not wealth per se, but how one comes by it, how it is maintained, and how it is used.

This is admittedly uncomfortable stuff, especially for those who are economically advantaged. So I again I reiterate: it’s not wealth per se that is wrong. Or else this teaching would have no application to those who are not quite so economically advantaged. Indeed, again and again the prophets say similar things to everyone in God’s name: they proclaim righteousness, that is faithfulness to the one and only God, and justice, that is care for the equality of fellow human beings. The prophets call again and again, and their words are still as searing now as they ever have been because the mortal sins of idolatry and oppression have yet to become extinct from human hearts, no matter how much money and power they do or don’t have.

Still this bit of Amos fascinates me because it offers a glimpse of a people who had become quite cozy in their situation vis-a-vis the situation of less fortunate others - these people did not think there was anything wrong! They had made their way to the top - this was their right - no matter that their abundance meant that myriads of people struggled to keep their homes and families and lives, that the better part of the population lived in abject poverty and exceptional debt while they had so much at those others’ expense… This, like the rich man in the Gospel, literally represents the most egregious failure of basic human concern and empathy - a basic ability to see every

¹ Amos 6:3
person as a child of God and worthy of dignity and care. These folks have literally hardened their hearts, closed their eyes and numbed their minds.

Why? Probably because to behold, to really take in the predicament and suffering of others not only points to something being wrong in the world, but also engages our own deep pain and helplessness. These cold-hearted Israelites on their mountain ate and drank and slept - because to do anything else would be to face the harsh reality of their own inner poverty, not to mention the poverty around them.

Christopher Bryan, retired professor of New Testament at Sewanee puts it this way: “Indeed if we cannot deal with our own misfortunes, how shall we reflect on the Holocaust, or Mogadishu, or Ethiopia, or the Mayan Indians, or the Native Americans, or the poor children in Breslan, or the helpless men and women and children who are being killed daily in Syria and Iraq and Israel and Palestine? Indeed, how shall we even meditate on a crucifix? If you have raced with those on foot says the prophet [Jeremiah], and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? Or shall our Christianity become a self-centred [sic] quest for our own self-fulfillment, which can ignore the world’s pain so long as it is not our pain?”

Shall our Christianity become a self-centered quest for our own self-fulfillment, which can ignore the world’s pain so long as it is not our pain??

We live in an age where all it takes is opening an internet browser, pulling up FaceBook or clicking on Twitter to see right there the extent of the pain that is shot through this world. We live in an age when Social Media has granted us unprecedented access - even amid the funny clips of cats with brain-freezes, misspelled memes, and GIFs of bad tatoos - access to the reality of the questioning and struggle and suffering of people the world over - the globe’s three dimensions have in so many ways collapsed and we can momentarily see smartphone videos of mass executions in Iran, bombings in Brussels, brutality in Tulsa, or the shooting of a boy in Cleveland

And it would be so much easier to hide from it all; to build up walls and pillows and banquets around ourselves and spend our days like there was no tomorrow? It is always a temptation to harden our hearts and numb our minds and close our eyes, pop in the headphones and zone-out, because the need and the pain inside of us, let alone around us, can be quite literally stultifying.

---

6 Jeremiah 12:5.
A number of weeks ago I had the pleasure of chatting over coffee with one of the primary staff organizers for Greater Cleveland Congregations, known to most as “GCC”. GCC is a powerhouse of an organization in this area, having successfully tackled actions related to everything from healthcare to gun violence. In fact, right now GCC is calling people together from its constituent congregations to help canvass 12,000 homes and engage significant conversations about voting in key neighborhoods where people might not feel empowered about the importance of their voice.

Much of what GCC does, while seeming so big at the end, begins with one-to-one conversations. Indeed, sitting over coffee that day, that GCC organizer looked at me and asked: “Dale, what keeps you up at night?”

Now, full disclosure here - that question took me aback because I didn’t want to admit that I sleep like a rock, and once 11:30 comes around it’s no sooner 6 a.m.! What keeps me up at night? Well… almost nothing - but that wasn’t her point. Her point was *What issues touch the pain in your own heart and ignite it to action?*

What keeps me up at night? Eating disorders and the people who suffer with them for years; the homelessness and suicide rates among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth; the thought that I serve parishioners who have to fear for their lives from our own government because of the color of their skin; the debt and employment crisis for so-called millennials; housing discrimination… and the list goes on, and my heart breaks...

My heart breaks. It’s so painful. And that’s why a better part of me would just love to be somnambulant; to lie back on my bed and sleep it away, for I do sleep so easily; to close facebook, or shut my eyes and no longer see Charlotte or Aleppo, the Twin Towers or Beirut, the West Side or just a half-mile down the hill on Superior - to turn my face, not to grieve, to feel no pain, and think that this is the just the way the world *has* to be, or worse, to convince myself that nothing is wrong… but then I read Amos today, weeping his oracle: “Alas!”

Alas! for silly, comfy people like me who have the leisure to dream sweet dreams while others struggle for their lives. Alas!

I assure you: God will not sleep, God will not dream, God will not stop until this messy world is made whole and calm and beautiful. There is no discomfort, no privation, no sacrifice too great for God in order to make the divine will done on earth as it is in heaven.

---

8 Amos 6:1a. The prophet uses “Alas” here as it would be used when one is grieving the death of someone. Thus this oracle is an ironic grieving over these Samarian elites who are feasting and living it up to death. - G. H Wittenburg in “Amos 6:1-7: ‘They dismiss the day of evil but you bring near the rule of violence’”. 
Shall our Christianity become a self-centered quest for our own self-fulfillment, which can ignore the world’s pain so long as it is not our pain?? Certainly not!

So I ask you: What keeps you up at night? What breaks your heart? What in this world glances your pain so sharply that you must either act or ignore it completely?

Dear Ones, God is calling us not to turn away, not to harden or close or numb, but to feel. Feel the pain inside and out and let our brokenness bring us together in this Holy Home, together with God, working. Found striving with everything we’ve got - everything - to put our painful, broken hearts in redemptive service to the pain of this world.