

## **“Hear This!”**

### **Amos 8:4-7**

It's 750 B.C. and Israel has pursued a successful policy of foreign expansion by exploiting the weakness of its war-torn neighbors. During this time Israel controlled the major trade routes of the ancient world and this new prosperity transformed the structure of Israelite society. What once had been almost entirely a rural culture became more and more urban, and power shifted to the central marketplace and to those engaged in commerce.

Farmers were victimized during this period. Small landowners were forced off their land and their property passed into the hands of wealthy urban elites. The urban wealthy transformed independent farmers into tenants, and they built their large estates on the backs of the poor. A tenant would turn over a large portion of the grain produced as payment for use of the land.

Amos, himself a farmer, announced the charge and judgment in 5:11 -- “Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.”

The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer as the rich foreclosed on the debt of the small landowners and took their land away. In the ancient Near East the transfer of footgear was evidence of the transfer of real property. In verse 6 when Amos condemns the merchants for “burying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals,” he is condemning them for foreclosing on debt and taking legal title to the land of the poor.

In addition to the merchants, there were the bankers without whose cooperation the rigging of scales would have been impossible. Amos describes them in verse 5 – “We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.”

The prophet knew that if there was going to be any hope for the poor and hungry, there would have to be a fundamental shift in their economic and political system. Such a change would have to involve a redistribution of wealth in which the poor could rid themselves of debt and regain control of some land.

The prophets looked back to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament and remembered that in Leviticus and Deuteronomy every seventh year was to be a sabbatical year in which all debts were forgiven, all Hebrew slaves freed, and the land allowed to lie fallow to restore its fertility. Every 50<sup>th</sup> year was to be a jubilee in which land automatically returned to its original owner.

The biblical writers were profoundly aware that unjust economic structures prevented a proper relationship with God. So long as inequality and injustice to the poor were built into the fabric of society, faith in the God who had liberated Israel from oppression in Egypt was impossible.

Jesus continues that prophetic tradition at the beginning of his ministry when he announces a jubilee year: Luke 4:18-19 -- <sup>18</sup>"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Even though our American financial and political system seems ultramodern in its complexity, I would suggest that it's quite ancient in the same brutal ways wealth has always asserted power over the poor. Nothing much has changed economically in the past 2700 years since Amos did his prophesying.

We have Divinity brothers and sisters going through bankruptcy and foreclosure. My own mother went through bankruptcy and foreclosure one year ago this month. Our retired members and relatives, who lost too much during the recession and had only social security payments to fall back on, simply couldn't make it.

I believe it doesn't have to be this way. There is a biblical solution only if our politicians and Wall Street elites had the compassion and the guts to implement it. More and more people across the nation are talking about it because it combines a sense of social justice with old fashioned common sense.

It is forgiveness – forgive the debtors. What a biblical idea!

Write down the principal they owe on their mortgage to match the current market value of their home, so they will no longer be underwater. Refinance the loan with a reduced, current interest rate, so the monthly payment is at a level that the struggling homeowner can handle. This keeps families in their homes, with a renewed stake in the future. It gives homeowners incentive to keep up their payments, because once again they'll have some equity and the opportunity to accumulate more.

Some people are morally offended by this idea and not just bankers. Forgiveness sounds to them like old-fashioned bleeding-heart liberalism. Letting failed borrowers off the hook encourages bad habits. It's bad enough that we allow them to go through bankruptcy.

It is true. Forgiveness does require some sympathy – a sentiment in scarce supply among our governing elites. Our politicians have been taught by a generation of corporate CEO’s to brush aside feeling and compassion and focus on the bottom line. They say as they have said for the past 2700 years, that the common good is best served by sticking to the unsentimental economics of “me first, never mind the losers.” As long as I get my multi-million dollar salary and bonus, who cares what’s going on on Pearl Road in Parma Heights.

Forgiving debtors is the right thing to do not only because it says so in both our Old and New Testaments, but because the elite bankers have already been forgiven. The largest banks were in effect relieved of any guilt for their crimes of fraud or for causing the financial breakdown – when our government bailed them out, no questions asked.

Meanwhile, those of us living along the Pearl Rd. corridor in Strongsville, Middleburg Heights, Parma Heights, Parma, and all the way into Cleveland on W. 25<sup>th</sup> St. are reaching deep into our own pockets as followers of Christ in trying to level the playing field.

Last month, on December 11<sup>th</sup>, Karen, Laura, Natalie, Mary, the Naumans and I joined with 13 of our confirmands on a trek up Pearl Rd. to the Redeemer Crisis Center to serve our second Sunday of the month meal to the poor and homeless 100 that come each month. Members of Divinity had donated over 600 pairs of new socks, many winter coats, bags of clothing and a hot meal of homemade stew.

When our caravan pulled up to the church at 2:45, there were already about 20 people standing out in the cold waiting for the 5:00 meal. After almost 9 years, they greet me by name and with smiles. As we unload our vehicles, they know we come to share and to serve. But we had no idea what was about to happen.

As we worked inside preparing Christmas bags of food upstairs in the gym while others of us were preparing the meal downstairs, the crowd outside kept growing and growing. We began serving early because of the cold. The church basement immediately filled to capacity as I shared devotions and prayer.

More were lined up at the door. Families with small children, young men and old, women with bags, Black, White, Asian, Latino, Native American, all waiting to be fed. Our normal 100 turned into 300 as folks left and new people came in to fill their places at the tables.

Carol kept filling bowls of stew in the kitchen as our confirmands carried them out and served them. Thanks to Divinity generosity we had just enough stew and just enough socks for each person to get two pair on their way out. Even with Mary and me directing traffic it was still mass chaos. But our mission to feed the hungry and clothe the poor was accomplished. We were proud of our confirmands who kept at it, putting into action everything they've learned in class to follow Jesus' example of serving others, no matter what the task. I'm sure we'll be hearing more about that experience as our 8<sup>th</sup> graders write their faith statements in the next weeks. And my hope is that our 2<sup>nd</sup> graders who received their Bibles this morning will someday be 8<sup>th</sup> graders preparing to affirm their baptisms by living out their faith through serving our brothers and sisters in need.

When Jesus' future disciples were casting their nets into the sea and this stranger came along and said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people;" they had not a clue what was about to happen to them when they "immediately left their nets and followed him."

Even though we are post-resurrection followers of Christ, we are often still clueless when we go out to serve God's people. But we have the advantage of being strengthened by God's Word.

Amos prophesied, "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land. Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

May the peace of God . . .

#720 – We Are Called