

Seven Day Faith

Amos 5: 11-17, 21-24

Luke 10: 25-37

Faith is known for giving people comfort. That's a positive. Faith can also be known for making people quite comfortable. Maybe too comfortable. When faith is too comfortable, when its mystery isn't pushing you with doubts and questions, then that's not so positive. In fact, it can be the cause of a corruption of faith. This may have the appearance of great strength of faith, a high level of certainty and conviction. In fact, it's a sign of trouble.

Folks who are **not** religious will often point to the tragic history of religions. That history shows how religions have corrupted their best principles with the worst offenses. How can Christianity claim obedience to the Prince of Peace when its legacy of violence has been so pronounced throughout its history? How can God be regarded as loving when the pages of Hebrew scripture drip with the blood of those who failed to be obedient to this same God? How can Islam claim peace and charity as its central tenets when its history of violence and warfare is no different from Christians or Jews? It appears that the faithful are a bunch of mocking hypocrites.

The corruption of faith often comes from one's comfortable position within it. That comfort gives rise to a sense of righteousness, and empowerment to judge and condemn, even engaging in violence as a sacred and beneficial act.

The corrective position for the faithful comes when we have recognition of personal and corporate sinfulness, and a genuine belief in the sovereignty and grace of God. Further, that sense of divine sovereignty and blessing of God's grace must not be compromised or cheapened. Such pillars of belief cannot be taken for granted lest their exceptional quality gets diminished with familiarity. And comfort with these beliefs should not suggest that there is authorization in them to act as a direct agent of God's will. Let's add personal humility as a key characteristic for the faithful. There can be a blurring of boundaries and then trespass into areas where we have no business.

This applies even more to the pastor or religious leader since there is the expectation that we're authorized to provide counsel and instruction on matters of faith, religion, and practice. It also holds true that the worst corrupters of faithfulness can be religious leaders, and the ones causing the most damage are religious leaders.

Among Presbyterians in particular, this means not only pastors but also elders. While this church hasn't produced any elders in my time who were out of line in any big way, my experience in other places and positions has brought me into contact with enough to know that such people do become leaders, problematic and dangerous ones, too.

The few of us who have been following the *Star Wars* movies on Thursday nights – the first three episodes – have seen how a person can be identified as spiritually gifted, so gifted as to be identified as “the chosen one” of prophecy who would restore order

and goodness to the universe. Yet we've also seen how that celebrated, spiritually gifted person has so many faults, and is compromised by a lack of discipline, self-absorption, and entitlement. We can see how he routinely teeters on the edge in his willingness to succumb to weak, convoluted, and corrupt reasoning while at the same time admitting that such paths diverge from the one intended, one that's compassionate, just, and humble. We're left wondering whether the hero will take the plunge into the forbidden and foreboding "dark side," and correct himself and save the whole situation from impending doom. We'll learn all about it this Thursday in the final half of Episode III.

Then it's no surprise that scriptures relate the people of God going off track as they take simple ideas, simple gifts and blessings from God and turn them into corruptions.

In the reading from the prophet Amos, the passage starts with a denunciation of Israel's exploitation of the vulnerable by the wealthy and powerful. They've done well for themselves, strong, spacious "stone mansions" and "lush vineyards." But since the poor are 'trampled on,' exploited by landowners collecting rents and denied justice as bribes bend the law to favor the elites, the prophet declares that the wealthy and powerful will **not** live in those mansions, **nor** drink the wine of their vineyards. Amos decries the lack of justice and righteousness, prophesying judgment and destruction on the elites. In vs. 17 comes the ominous expression, "for I will pass through your midst." Where have we heard that expression before? It was at the Passover in Egypt when the spirit of death passed through the midst of God's people, but claimed the first born of all Egyptians. In this instance in Amos, we can assume that the sense is that God will pass through his people in the same way God passed through the Egyptians.

When we jump ahead to vs 21, we find that those involved in this unjust and exploitative behavior are diligent in their faithful duties – good church-going folks. Amos mentions their observance of sacred feasts and their regular worship services, the generosity of their offerings, and the fine music that plays in the sanctuary. But he names each one in conjunction with a divine condemnation. *I hate, I despise your feasts and can't stand your assemblies. Your offerings, no matter how generous, are refused. I won't listen to your nice music—silence it!*

As if anticipating the response of God's people, Amos answers their question about 'what could possibly be wrong,' or 'why the anger and rejection of our sacred worship?' Amos demands: *Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amos makes this declaration about justice and righteousness because that's what's absent from the whole mess in Israel. They've forgotten what this religious devotion is all about, and corrupted it. They disconnected their devotion from their God. Amos is there to remind them that at the foundation of their experience of God needs to be God's priority, the daily practice of justice and righteousness. Religious devotion on the Sabbath without the practice of justice and righteousness every day of the week has nothing to do with God. In fact, God is angry at the mockery they have made of his Torah-Law. Amos promises that the consequences will be severe.

Clearly and unequivocally stated in Amos, but also present in other prophets and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God declares a passionate concern about justice and righteousness, a powerful concern for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. When God's own people tolerate and participate in exploitation, injustice, and oppression, it raises God's blood pressure to the breaking point.

As we look at the basics of a sacred faithfulness, we discover in a passage like this in Amos that God has relatively uncomplicated goals for his faithful people. The notions of justice and righteousness are simpler than the Ten Commandments, much less the hundreds of injunctions of Torah-Law. Justice and righteousness; that's at the heart of this whole faith business. By abandoning justice and righteousness, and focusing instead on other distractions can only lead to the corruption of faithfulness and a sad mockery of God's will and purpose.

In another well-known passage, the prophet Micah mocks worship and sacrifices and offerings that fail to value justice and righteousness. Micah then answers a rhetorical question about true worship saying, *What does God require of you, O mortal? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*

Prophets like Amos and Micah know that the faithful have lost sight of what God really expects. They try to re-awaken the faithful to the very basic tenets of a worthy devotion and faithfulness.

In Amos, the prophet dealt with the corruption of faith on the big national/societal scale. When we turn to the familiar story in Luke's gospel of the good Samaritan, we find Jesus is making it very personal.

The exchange starts off with a question from a lawyer, really someone who is an expert in the Torah-Law, not quite the same as a modern lawyer. This expert in the Torah asks Jesus: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* The setting is quite different from the way Matthew and Mark put it. There, the context is one of scribes and Pharisees challenging Jesus with an intent on trapping him in some blasphemous statement. They ask which is the greatest commandment. Not so in Luke.

The Torah-Law expert asks how he can *inherit* eternal life, akin to the question of the rich man in another story. Both talk about eternal life as what they want to **inherit** – *inherit* being the key word. They don't expect to **earn** it *per se*, and they believe they can simply claim it for themselves. They believe they have a privileged position as Jews, therefore *inheritors* of eternal life. It is after all the promise of God to God's people, the Jews. These folks believe with certainty that they're **first** in line. They feel very comfortable and confident in their beliefs.

Jesus flips the question back to the Torah expert, *What do you think?* In Luke, Jesus doesn't give the answer; the Torah expert provides it: Simply love God and love your neighbor.

But then the Torah expert shows his weenie side. The text says that he wants to justify himself, to be affirmed in his preferred beliefs. He asks Jesus, *Who is my neighbor?* He wants to hear Jesus say that his neighbor is the one is faithful to God, like he is, a fellow Jew. This affirmation would also effectively restrict the love commandment to those people who are **like him**, Jews who share the same faith and practice, and excluding everyone else – the sinners!

Instead, Jesus spins the tale of the man who was robbed and left for dead in the road as first a priest and then a Levite passed by and did nothing. There may have been very solid religious reasons on which the priest and the Levite would have based their action to avoid and ignore the man left for dead. The audience hearing the story can imagine the reasons. After the priest and the Levite, who comes next?

A Samaritan, despised by Jews as inferior, sinful people destined for condemnation and **not** sharing in the promises of God – a Samaritan of all people – goes above and beyond in caring for the victim.

Jesus closes by asking the Torah expert which one was a “neighbor” to the victim in the sense of righteousness under the Torah-Law. The expert is forced to say, *the one who had mercy on him*.

Yet Jesus is likely depressed that the Torah expert can take the two love commands from God and twist them into a self-serving knot. He uses the sacred law to claim and justify preferred status for himself. That preferred status should get him an *exclusion* or *exemption* from considering any and all people as “neighbors,” as sisters and brothers in the family of God, as God clearly intends.

We see how the religious and self-assumed righteous practice a faith that works very well on the Sabbath, in worship, within their own faith community. The prophets and teachers advocate something quite controversial: a faith that works seven days a week, that is exercised and practiced outside of worship with the same commitment as on the Sabbath, and that works in every community setting, not just inside the church or among Christians like it was some private club or elite party. The seven day faith is exposed to all of the ways that God’s creation can tempt, tantalize, and entice the faithful toward goodness and toward evil, into righteousness and into sinfulness, with abundant blessing and with total corruption.

May we take steps to ensure that our faith is not a Sunday-only occasion but a seven day experience. May we check our comfort levels and push beyond them. And may we endeavor to uphold recognition of the sovereignty of God that prevents us from imagining that God is some reflection of our desires. Rather, may we be ready to admit that God’s word to us today can awaken in us a new understanding of God’s love and grace that we’re called to share in the world seven days a week.