

## *When Religious Isn't Righteous*

Amos 5: 10-14, 21-24      Luke 10: 25-37

There is a steady refrain in most major faith traditions that scorns those who practice religion, devotions, ritual, and the like in a way that is disconnected from the realities of the world where people suffer and die continually. Those who are religious in this way have partitioned their spirituality from the world's reality. It may be in the noxious form of a "personal relationship" which imagines my own God or my own Savior, but cannot extend that perspective to be inclusive of others, except that they, too, should get their own "personal relationship" with their own God or their own Savior. In this progression, everyone ends up with their own God or Savior who affirms them and has no real existence beyond them. And they then join together with people who are like themselves.

In this scheme, one must simply re-affirm one's commitment to this relationship. Attending religious services and practicing certain devotions become sufficient proof of faith and fidelity to the relationship. Other activities are not an essential part of the commitment, although one can portray benevolent acts as something like "extra credit." Those acts of compassion, generosity, and graciousness are bonus features that have their primary value in the prism of this personal relationship. The person comes away believing that they are indeed a good person and belong in this special sacred relationship. They believe that they have done even *more* than what was expected.

Disturbing this scheme is dangerous. It suggests that someone who may have gone through their whole life with this exact framework has really missed the boat and needs to change their perceptions and begin setting this sacred relationship in a wholly different context. It's dangerous because the resistance to such a disruptive change can come from every direction. Try that and you can expect the inquisition to start almost immediately.

A faith that gets kept in a silo, walled off from the rest of life and the concerns of all others, is no faith at all. Rather, it becomes a mirror to oneself, affirming oneself, and affirming anyone who is like you, looks like you, holding the same beliefs and opinions. It is undisturbed by contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities. Yet, a cocoon of self-assurance is not what faith is all about, not what we hear being demanded in scripture.

Like many others, in this church one cannot talk about any current event in a critical light because it will invariably be taken as a partisan political statement rather than a candid assessment of a current event in light of the gospel teachings about the Kingdom of God. To broach any such subject would breach the cocoon of this special spiritual relationship, the cocoon of self-assurance. Maintaining this practice, no one gets discomforted by the possibility that we have censored reality itself out of the sanctuary, put duct tape over the mouth of the gospel, insisted that the world about which God is concerned has no place in the meeting of God with God's people, and that the Kingdom about which Jesus built his ministry and directs our ministry should talk only in abstractions, in principles, and in vagaries, but never about reality.

In keeping with the mandate to ignore catastrophe, crisis, violence, death, war, threats of war, and anything and everything that might disturb the cocoon and disrupt the fake peace that maintains the sanctuary of God with God's people, I will now proceed with abstractions and extrapolations unconnected with reality in order to describe the Kingdom of God. There is one word which Jesus never used when describing the Kingdom of God and one word which has no place; that word is "except." Jesus never said. "The Kingdom of God is like this, *except* for this ...."

In the reading from the prophet Amos, we start with a denunciation of Israel's exploitation of the vulnerable, where the wealthy have done very well for themselves, but where the poor and weak have been exploited to benefit the wealthy. Amos decries the lack of justice and equity, prophesying against the folks in magnificent mansions and the owners of verdant vineyards. Justice is silenced by bribes and the system is stacked against the one brought to the courts. The prophet states: *Therefore, the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil.* Eugene Peterson's *The Message* – a paraphrase – renders that line: *Justice is a lost cause. Evil is epidemic. Decent people throw up their hands. Protest and rebuke are useless, a waste of breath.* In other words, people have simply surrendered to the corruption and accept it as a *fait accompli* about which they are powerless to correct without threat to themselves. Let's be prudent, of course, above all else.

We jump ahead and find that the folks involved in this unjust and exploitative behavior are diligent in their faithful duties – good church-going folks. Amos mentions their observation 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 cannot stand your assemblies. Your offerings, no matter how generous are refused. I won't listen to your harps and singing – silence them!*

As if answering their question about 'what could possibly be wrong with our religious devotions,' Amos says: *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. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* again on that last line: *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.*

It seems they have forgotten what this religious devotion is all about. They seem to have disconnected their devotion from God and God's priorities. Amos is there to remind them that at the foundation of their experience of God needs to be God's priority, an emphatic practice of justice, equity, and peace. Religious devotion without the practice of justice, equity, and peace has nothing to do with this God whom they believe they're worshipping. In fact, God is angry at the mockery that they have made of his Torah-Law and promises that the consequences will be severe.

When God's own people tolerate exploitation, injustice, and oppression, it raises God's blood pressure to the breaking point. This is never good; God is angry.

As we look at the fundamentals of a sacred faithfulness, we discover in a passage like this one in Amos that God has relatively uncomplicated goals for his faithful people. The notions of justice, equity, and peace are much shorter than even the Ten Commandments, not to mention the hundreds of injunctions of the Torah-Law. Justice, equity, and peace; that's at the heart of this whole business of faith.

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.* Religious stuff? You know, it is nowhere near as important.

The prophets like Amos and Micah know that the faithful have lost sight of what God really expects and try to bring a turnaround among God's people. But you see, their religious practice is easy. No one is much interested in justice, equity, and peace; it takes too much work and people will get upset.

The familiar parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 also reveals the uncomplicated fundamentals of the Kingdom and what God expects from his people.

The exchange starts off with a question from an expert in the Torah-Law. This expert asks, *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* The setting is quite different from the way Matthew and Mark put it. We should definitely pay attention to the word *inherit*, akin to the question of the rich man in another story. Both speakers regard eternal life as something to inherit. They don't expect to **earn** it *per se*, or **do** anything to gain its possession. They believe it is an entitlement to which they surely have a claim, as Torah-observant, righteous Jews who religiously fulfill all requirements. I would go as far as to say that, due to their sense of religious righteousness, they believe they would go to the front of the line – *first in line!*

Jesus flips the question back to the Torah-expert, *What do you think is needed?* 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 narrator comments that the Torah-expert wants to justify himself, to be affirmed in his preferred beliefs. So, he asks Jesus, *Who **is** my neighbor?* He wants to hear Jesus say that his neighbor is faithful to God **like he is**, a fellow Torah-observant Jew.

Instead, Jesus spins this tale of a man robbed and left for dead in the road as first a priest and then a Levite pass by and do nothing. Then a Samaritan, despised by Jews as inferior people destined for condemnation, surely **not** for eternal life in the Kingdom, goes above and beyond in caring for the victim. Jesus closes by asking the Torah-expert which was a neighbor to the victim. The expert is forced to say, *the one who had mercy on him.* Note that his answer doesn't mention the Samaritan, but *the one who had mercy*, reflecting the actions of one living Kingdom values.

This is not simply a feel-good story as many will portray it. There is a bitterly ironic contrast here that cannot be missed. Remember the Torah-observant expert asked the question. His question assumes that the Torah-observant religious person is *first* in line. Instead, Jesus places two characters in his story who are stand-ins for the Torah-observant religious person, a priest and a Levite. Surely the Torah-observant expert sees people *like himself* in the priest and Levite. But they lack compassion, show no generosity, and reflect the cocoon of their self-assured religious righteousness by their indifference to the real world, to the real demands of God, to the expectations of the Kingdom life. No, Torah-observant expert: not only are you **not even in** the line, a Samaritan who is everything you detest and despise is at the *front* of the line in the Kingdom of God; the Samaritan gets it and you don't! Religiosity disconnected from the suffering and struggle of the world, that has made an exception of *those* people and *their* problems, for you folks, there is **no** place for you in the line.

God has tried to make it simple first through his law, then through the prophets and then through Jesus. Unite in common purpose, mutually compassionate, caring and supporting each other, advocating justice, making peace, acting graciously, and giving from the abundance that God has provided to eliminate the poverty and suffering that humanity has created. That's when the promise of life gets realized. Then the praise of worship and the prayers of devotion actually mean something to God. Apart from that, don't bother God with your cocoon of disconnected religious devotions. It simply gets God angry.

With today's "Christmas in July" theme, let's connect to the way that Mary understood what God was doing with her maternity. Here are the radical and revolutionary words grounded in visceral reality - "The Magnificat" here a bit different as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

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May we recognize justice, equity, and peace as the heart and soul of our Lord's ministry and teaching about the Kingdom, never *ever* resorting to the use of the word "except." It's all about God's Kingdom transforming this world; there are no exclusions and there are no exceptions.