

Sermon - November 12, 2017 - Pentecost 23

Let Justice Roll Down and Righteousness Flow

Amos 5:18–24



Dear friends in Christ,

Our meditation this day is on the Old Testament reading from Amos chapter 5.

I must confess it is a rather uneasy text to meditate on, especially when we do have our own ways of relating to God, when we have our own thoughts when it comes to God and his Church, of worship and his word, the reality is that we unknowingly or knowingly tend to deceive ourselves, so when we hear a text like our Old Testament reading, it does hit us hard.

When we get things done, the things that we think are required of us, we feel great. But when we do more, beyond what is expected of us, even better, and we even think highly of ourselves. Now, I think that we should always excel at what we are to do.

However, on what standards you measure what you do? Because it is so easy to set our own standards, and equally easy to achieve and excel at them.

However those standards we set for ourselves, are not really our own. We may come up with the standards we want to achieve. We may even try to convince others that our standards should be their standards too.

But in the end, if our self-conceived standards are not the true standards, we have simply set ourselves up for failure.

This is so often the way it is for us humans and our relationship with our God. We come up with standards thinking and believing that those are God's standards. Jesus even pointed this truth as he taught saying: "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you..." In other words Jesus said: "you have been taught this way, but really it should be this way..." Jesus was calling his listeners to heed God's standards, not their own, not any human standards for that matter. And God's standard is nothing short of perfect obedience to his holy Law.

I. Amos warns Israel that the Day of the Lord will mean judgment.

This was part of Israel's problem in our Old Testament Reading for today: They were self-righteous in their estimation that they were achieving a great standard of godliness, that they were achieving God's standards. They looked forward to the Day of the Lord because they assumed on that day they would be rewarded for their achievements. God would come and destroy Israel's enemies, and on that day God will honor them and let the world know how just how good they'd been. However, Israel's standards were self-made, they were not God's; they were deceiving themselves. Amos warns them that the Day of the Lord instead of being a blessing it will mean judgment, God said: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them."

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.” (vv 21–23).

Now, if you were an Israelite back then, how would you respond? How would you react? You can almost hear the response of the people of Israel: “Wait! What? These are the things you commanded through Moses; this is your law, God. If you hate them, why are we wasting all our time doing them, then? We are fulfilling your commandments here!” Ahh. There it is: “Why are we wasting all our time doing them?” The problem was not with their worshiping. The problem was with the hearts of the worshipers. As Proverbs says: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination” (Prov. 21:27). Or as the NIV would put it: “The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable...”

What God established for eternal blessing, forgiveness, life, salvation, and enjoying all his spiritual blessings, the people had turned into just another task on the to-do list—one worship among many by which to please God, an excuse to party so to speak. Except that God had established the Old Testament worship not so the people could please him by their work, but so that he could make them pleasing to him through his work. As you see is not about what you do for God, but what God does for you, in you and through you!

Is not about what I do for God, but what God does for me, in me and through me!!

The truth is that what God prescribed as a true worship was not what the Israelites were following. True worship was meant to be done at the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, the people of Israel erected for themselves shrines in various places, where they could worship God. Now, you may ask what’s wrong with that! God would understand the difficulties of going to Jerusalem, besides their actions were to resemble those established by God, right? Yet the prophet Amos tells them that their hearts are not in it. Their hearts weren’t with the Lord when they insisted on doing things their way, in their thoughts and ideas. They weren’t honoring God’s standards! To add insult to injury, they also mixed in the rituals of pagan deities. No surprise; God had established his way, his place, specifically so that people wouldn’t all be off inquiring about new ideas, the ideas they’d pick up from false religions around them. And all along, they figured they were getting the religious stuff out of the way so they could get on with real life. But their false religion evidenced itself in the rest of their lives. Right worship leads to right living, while corrupt worship leads to corrupt living.

II. The Same judgment is for us.

Today, thousands years later, things haven’t changed. As you see, Jesus established his New Testament worship. He has promised where he will come to us with abundant blessing of forgiveness, life, and salvation: in his Word, in Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, and in the Holy Communion. But too many think they can access God apart from his established means. And so, they think they can commune with him at the lake or at the mountain or in the woods or at the beach, or home, without his word, baptism and Holy Communion.

Some think they can reach out to him in his house by generating sufficient excitement to feel really great about their worship. But apart from his Means of Grace—his Word, pure and simple but so very rich, the Sacraments, as ordinary as can be but giving eternal life—apart from them, there can be no right worship.

How about us here today, we that have all these gifts Jesus has established for his church to use? Do you think that yes we are prone to Israel's sin too?

Let's face it, some are here, but their minds are... well who knows? Is there not a "let's get this over with so we can get on to real life" attitude lurking in you?

Haven't you said "God doesn't really expect me in worship every Sunday!" Or haven't you said at other times, "I'm really busy and God knows I am, but he will forgive me, or not hold against me." Haven't you said "God isn't upset if we skip church once in a while to do other family stuff"?

I mean, we're in church almost every Sunday, that's gotta count for something, right?" "Going to church once a week is enough, Bible study, well... I'm not that kind of person..." God certainly doesn't expect that of me, does he?"

And yes there are those who say, "I have done lots for this church, so I expect a medal or something, some sort of recognition for my steadfastness..."

But don't you see? In all of these cases, just like that, the Divine Service has become something to check off your to-do list, in some cases exciting yes, but...just another item in the to-do-list.

What God has established for eternal blessing, forgiveness, life, and salvation, many have turned them into just another task on the to-do list—one worship among many by which to please God. The problem is that God has established his Means of Grace not so that you can please him by your work, but so that he can make you pleasing to him through his work.

Remember, it is not about what you do for God, but God does for you, in you and through you!

Is not about what I do for God, but what God does for me, in me and through me!!

And just like Israel, right worship leads to right living while corrupt worship leads to corrupt living. Breaking the First Table of the Law results in ignoring the Second Table. It flows, just as justice and righteousness, as Amos says in our text, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (v 24).

Instead, well, just think of what we watch on the TV. Or the things we look at on the computer screen. Some gossip about others. Other's don't help and support the neighbors in their physical need. Other's don't support the ministry of the congregation generously and with firstfruits but as an afterthought and with what's left over. In short, when St. Paul asks, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom 6:1), many times we answer "Why, yes, yes we shall!" Maybe we don't voice those words but we certainly live them out.

Those are the reasons why the words from Amos in today's reading sting us. Hear again what he says: "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (vv 18–20)

We want Jesus to return, to come and take us to live with him forever, right? Of course! We can't wait. But on this day, please, let's listen to Amos' warning: "In your sin, the coming of the Lord will be for you judgment instead of salvation." No these are

not easy words, and yes they shock us, how can that be! Doesn't God love us just the same?

III. Thanks be to God that for his justice and righteousness.

Yes he does! But not in the way we think or believe, but in his plan. And his plan is that he would not leave us in our sin. Jesus, God in the flesh, died to take your sin from you. Died on the cross, was buried but on the third day rose from the dead. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome is God's plan. Jesus is the exact reversal of everything Amos uses to warn you concerning the Day of the Lord. And his plan, God's plan is that you would repent of your sin, that you would change your way of thinking that is not about you, it is about God and what he wants to accomplish in you.

So then, repent! Repent of your false worship. Repent of believing that you are here to make yourself acceptable to God by what you do. And repent of all the corrupt living that results from your corrupt worship. Repent and rejoice.

Rejoice that justice has rolled down like waters, and righteousness has flowed like an ever-flowing stream. In Jesus, God "show[ed] his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26). On the cross, God's justice poured out his wrath on Jesus. Justice was served. Every sin was punished. But it was punished in him. God's justice rolled over Christ so that his righteousness flows to you. Through the waters of Holy Baptism, his righteousness is yours. You have been baptized into Jesus' death, and you have been baptized into his resurrection. Righteousness flows to you in the ever-flowing baptismal waters so that justice can roll down from you to serve your neighbor.

The Day of the Lord is coming. Take heart. For you, it will be a glorious day. Jesus has received the judgment you have deserved; his light has overcome the darkness. Baptism is an ever-flowing stream of Christ's righteousness for you. So today, as on the day of your Baptism, this statement is true: On the Lord's day, in word and sacrament, Jesus prepares you for the day of the Lord.

In Jesus, you are forgiven of all your sins. Amen.