

“The Power of Telling It Like It Is”
Sermon from Amos 4:1-5, 5:11-15
Given Sunday, September 27, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Listen to this word, you rich cows of Bashan, living in the mountain of Samaria: You defraud the poor, steal from the needy, and call out, “Bring me another drink!” The Sovereign YHWH swears this in holiness: the days are coming when you will be dragged out in baskets, every last one of you in fish baskets. You will be taken out of the city through the nearest breach in the wall, to be flung onto the dung heap. (It is YHWH who says this.) Come to Bethel and sin! Come to Gilgal, and sin even more! Offer your sacrifices the next morning and your tithes on the third day. Burn your thank offering of leavened bread and announce your freewill offering in a loud voice - those are the things that make you happy, children of Israel! (It is YHWH who speaks.) ... Rest assured, since you trampled on the poor, extorting inhumane taxes on their grain, those houses you built of hewn stone - you will never live in them; and those precious vineyards you planted - you will never drink their wine. For I have noted your many atrocities, and your countless sins, you persecutors of the righteous, you bribe-takers, you who deny justice to the needy at the city gate! That is why the prosperous moan in times like this, for such times bring disaster. Seek good and not evil so that you may live, and so that YHWH God Omnipotent may truly be with you as you have been claiming. Hate what is evil, and love what is good; maintain justice at the city gate, and it may be that YHWH God Omnipotent will take pity on the remnant of Joseph.

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“Dissent,” she wrote, “is a subject I have been obliged to think about more than occasionally in recent Terms.”

In her book *My Own Words*, the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg devoted a whole chapter to those times she disagreed with the majority ruling of her colleagues. She explained ordinarily, only the majority opinion is read from the bench. If there's a dissent written, it's noted, but not often heard, not described. So when it is, she tells us, it's a sign that the dissenters view the majority opinion as "profoundly misguided."

She learned from Justice Brandeis, who preceded her by many years, that it's wise to be sparing with dissents – he had a whole volume of writings he never publicly shared, either because the majority opinion made adequate changes once they heard his dissent, or because he thought the court's decision "would have limited impact and was unlikely to cause real harm in future cases." Dissenting too often, he thought, would weaken the impact of his voice, his disagreement, so he tucked away those writings except when it was crucial to speak up.

She quoted former Chief Justice Hughes, who in 1936 said, "A dissent in a court of last resort is an appeal...to the intelligence of a future day, when a later decision may possibly correct the error into which the dissenting judge believes the court to have been

betrayed.” And for the rest of her chapter, she described which of her dissents she understood to be “appealing to the intelligence of a future day” – the Lilly Ledbetter vs. Goodyear case about equal pay for equal work, the Shelby County vs. Holder case about preserving the protections of the Voting Rights Act, to make sure that everybody counts, to name a couple.

If prophecy in ancient Israel feels too far removed from our world today, maybe we could understand it better as dissent. Remember, prophets don’t tell the future, they tell the truth. They tell the truth about the world as it is. Maybe we could understand Amos better not as some religious fanatic, but as a citizen issuing a dissent against the way things are, stating a hope for how they might, in some future day, come to be instead.

Archeological evidence from the tenth century BCE shows cities where houses are all basically standard – like there was one blueprint, and every structure for dwelling was about the same size. But two hundred years later – like about the time our Amos comes on the scene – excavations from that period have uncovered neighborhoods. And some neighborhoods boasted lavish, sprawling houses. And some neighborhoods were home to much smaller dwelling places. The big houses were nearby other big houses, and

the little houses nearby other little ones. And that's the world – that stratified one – that Amos came as prophet to. The one where, from the sprawling yards of their extravagant homes, the women he calls “cows of Bashan” pull all the strings of the men who make the decisions at the city gate – that is, the men who sit at court and decide the questions of justice.

Before you go taking too much offense on behalf of these women, you should know that being called a cow was not necessarily an insult to Amos' audiences. Remember that Biblical love poem, the Song of Solomon, where one lover lists everything he finds beautiful about the other: “your hair is like a flock of goats; your waist is a mound of wheat; your teeth are like sheep, just shorn.” Bashan was a region noted for rich forests and fine pastures, and it produced very well-nourished cattle. Commentator James Luther Mays writes, “The Bashan cows are the women of quality in Samaria, the pampered darlings of society in Israel's royalist culture.” So these women, who have plenty, wield just enough power behind the scenes to convince those with public, official power – their husbands – to get and stay rich at any(body else's) expense.

And then – after those men manipulate the court proceedings – after they issue judgments that further impoverish the poor and abuse

the oppressed, after they bury any semblance of pity or empathy, any sense of justice they might have had so that they can benefit at the expense of others' suffering – after that, they all go to worship together. They go to sing the songs and pray the prayers of their tradition. They bring offerings – they bring ten percent of all they have – and then send it to God, and then announce it loudly, too, so that everyone will know what they're doing. They have the nerve to publicize their devotion to a God whose only demands are that they do justly and love mercy and walk humbly – while they blatantly defy each of those. And Amos comes to this scene and says, "I need to register my dissent." Says, "you may not hear me, but I am appealing to the intelligence – to the compassion, to the courage – of a future day."

It makes me think about the dissent we hear today, the ways people – not people sitting on high courts, but kids skipping school, grandmas gathering in the streets, people writing letters to the editor – it makes me think about the ways they register dissent today.

Part of Amos' power is that he doesn't mince words. He levels clear accusations at the guilty and they can't look away.

I remember the first time I heard about capital punishment was. It was from a t-shirt. I was a kid. An older friend wore a t-shirt that asked, "Why do we kill people who kill people to teach people that killing is wrong?" I said, "What's that about?" She said, "Yeah, it doesn't make sense, does it?" I said, "No, what does it mean? Who's the 'we'? Who does that?" She said, "We do." She was dressing her body, her daily, ordinary act of being in the world, to dissent.

Teenagers gather in massive groups during school hours, carrying signs that say, "We're skipping our lessons to teach you one." And the content of that lesson is on the other signs, the ones about fossil fuels and rising temperatures and who profits in all of that and who loses. The boldest of the signs reads: "You'll die of old age. We'll die of climate change." The words are harsh, right? So are the floods, and the droughts, and the fires. They're dissenting from our climate policies today in hopes that they might have a planet tomorrow.

I was on a call with some organizers for an event for racial justice and the discussion turned to what the white people in the group should be saying, or not saying. And one woman confessed how afraid she was to say something wrong, in a time as volatile as this one. And a black man on the call said, "You not saying anything

because of your worry about saying something wrong endangers all of us. You have to use your words. Otherwise you will kill us.”

The dissents are always born of hope. If the dissenters were hopeless, they'd keep quiet. If they thought things couldn't be different tomorrow than they are today, there'd be no reason to speak up and out. The prophet tells the people love what is good; hate what is evil, and commentator Donald Gowan says those are words of action, not just of attitude. To hate means to reject, he writes. To love means to choose. Amos was a solitary voice – just one – speaking to all those women on their lounge chairs, all those men in their seats of power. He was just one but his words have endured for centuries, and they haven't lost their power even today. The hope – then and now – lies with the hearer, with the possibility of those who witness the dissent responding in a new way, because of the possibility of a new day.

Ginsburg said, “Dissents speak to a future age. It's not simply to say, ‘My colleagues are wrong, and I would do it this way.’ But the greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that's the dissenter's hope: that they are writing not for today, but tomorrow.”

When she died, a kind of defeatism filled the air for a little while. Her life, and her death, are hugely consequential, and the timing of it all means there's a great deal on the line. And after their sorrow, people began speaking their fear about what her passing might mean for issues of justice in this country. And in response to that fear, in response to the defeatism, Karol Collymore tweeted, "Y'all. She was not our last hope. We are. We owe her at least that."

Amos might say, "We owe our God at least that."

I might add, "We owe each other at least that."