

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
July 16, 2006

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Scriptures: Amos 7:7-15, Psalm 85:8-13, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29.

I don't usually spend much time with the psalms as preaching texts. But today's psalm, Psalm 85, is one of my favorites; especially verse 10 where the psalmist says, "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. And later, in verse 13, "Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet"

These verses are packed with some of the big words in Hebrew, words that are loaded with meaning. Mercy might also be translated as "loving-kindness" and "truth" as steadfastness/reliability/trustworthiness. Righteousness refers to doing the right thing, kind of a combination of justice and integrity. And peace is shalom, that state of well-being for everyone. One day, justice will go out ahead of the Lord, and peace will follow along behind. In other words, the psalmist is saying, in a little nicer way, "No justice, no peace." Some people manage to say or shout that little line to make it sound like a threat. I think it is simply a statement of fact, it spells out how the world works.

Now, I found the psalm to be very straightforward. What I don't get is why this particular psalm is the psalm for the day when the Gospel text is the beheading of John the Baptist. Surely there is some other lament psalm that would have fit so much better. This Gospel text is one of those about which pastors call each other up and ask, "So, what are you going to do with this?"

For me, the hint was the Amos text. Amos is just a farmer. He trims trees. He is not a professional prophet, but God has sent him up to the king of Israel to say to him, "You have been disobeying God long enough. Now there are going to be consequences, severe consequences." Needless to say, the king was not especially pleased to hear from Amos. That is what Amos and John the Baptist had in common. Both of them spoke truth to power. And, as usual, power didn't like it too much.

But that is what being a prophet is all about. A prophet is not some kind of fortune-teller. A prophet was the one who looked around at life and society and then stood up to the king and said, "What you are doing is wrong. What you have done is evil in God's sight: The prophet was the one who stood up to super-elite and the hyper-religious types and said, "You are corrupt. You have twisted worship and religious practices to suit yourself. To make yourselves look good. You have completely ignored the things that really matter to God: caring for the poor, bringing justice to the oppressed. No wonder prophets were beaten and killed on a regular basis. Who wants to hear that kind of stuff?

Jesus was a prophet too. He was a teacher, and a healer, a friend of sinners. But he was also a prophet. He spoke truth to power. He confronted those who exploited and oppressed the poor and powerless. And the powerful were not too happy about him. That means, if we, as followers of Jesus, are supposed to do what Jesus did, then sometimes we too are called to be prophets. We too are called to stand up and speak truth to power. We too are called to stand up to the king and say, "What you are doing is evil in God's

sight. We are called to stand up to the hyper-religious and say, "You have twisted religion to suit yourselves. You have ignored what truly pleases God: kindness, justice and humility." We are called to stand up and say again, "No justice, no peace."

Yesterday morning – when I was still turning these passages over and over in my head – I heard a little clip of music on the radio; the first line out of a song from the musical Peter Pan. It was the one that goes, "I won't grow up. I don't wanna go to school." Maybe that's what happens to us as Christians sometimes. We don't want to grow up. We want to live forever in the early stages of discipleship, the easy parts where we are nurtured by God's love, and healed by God's forgiveness. We don't want to grow up to the harder parts of changing our lives, of taking risks to serve more fully and faithfully. We don't much care for going down the roads that might lead to confrontation or struggle. We don't like people to be mad at us. So instead we say, "I won't grow up." I admit that approach might be safer, but I daresay, it's not faithful.

I recently came across a rather unusual blessing. It was titled simply, "A Franciscan Blessing" It read, "May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done."

What an interesting blessing. Anger at injustice? Maybe part of growing up a Christian is getting to the point where you realize that being a Christian is not the same as being a nice person. Nice-ness, in some instances, is highly over-rated. Sometimes being nice is a cop-out. Sometimes we ought to be angry over injustice. We ought to be suspicious of the party line. We need to be impatient for change, and insistent that justice prevails. There is a time for being passionate and tough. Sometimes being faithful will include not being "nice."

There is a pastor by the name of Erwin McManus who tells the story about the time his son, Aaron, went away to church camp. Pr. McManus wrote, "One summer Aaron went to a youth camp. He was just a little guy, and I was kind of glad because it was a church camp. I figured he wasn't going to hear all those ghost stories, because ghost stories can really cause a kid to have nightmares.

But unfortunately, since it was a Christian camp and they didn't tell ghost stories, because we don't believe in ghosts, they told demon and Satan stories instead. And so when Aaron got home, he was terrified. "Dad, don't turn off the light!" he said before going to bed. "No, Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I'm afraid. They told all these stories about demons." And I wanted to say, "They're not real." He goes, "Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?"

I could feel it. I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a life of safety, safety, safety. I said, "Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room." And he goes, "All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy."

It's not a bad prayer. And sometimes that is my prayer for us, especially those who God is calling to be prophets. Being a grown-up Christian is not about staying safe. It is, in part, about becoming dangerous, dangerous to the force of evil at work around us. That's why I pray that we might be dangerous, that we might be bold enough to speak truth to power. That we might be fearless in the face of the forces of evil that would silence us.

We are commanded to love our neighbor. The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is apathy, indifference. May we be so moved by love of our neighbor that we get up and out of our comfort zone. May we be bold enough to be prophets in our day. May we stand up to the powers that be, and speak truth. May we be dangerous to the powerful who oppress the powerless. May we be a part of bringing about the day when loving-kindness and steadfastness meet, when justice and peace embrace. Amen.