

“Grace and Truth”
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
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The prologue to the Gospel According to John uses majestic poetry to describe the incarnation, God’s willingness to enter this world as one of us. In the beginning was the Word, the author writes, in him was life and that life was the light of all people, indeed a light that the darkness has not and cannot overcome. A messenger came to announce his coming, the one we know as John the Baptizer, and then the Word became flesh, God entered this world, Jesus was born. He revealed God’s glory, the very fullness of who God is, which is summed up in two words – grace and truth.

It is a wonderful image which ends with a specific promise of grace and truth, two realities desperately needed and brought in perfect balance by Jesus. I have often said that since we cannot match the balance of Jesus, we need to lean toward grace, but we still truth. I have also said, somewhat facetiously, that many of us want grace and truth, only grace for me and truth for you! We are not always as generous with others as we want them to be with us. But all of this having been said, we all need grace and truth and this is what Jesus brings.

This is also what we find in our reading from Hebrews today, only in reverse order. In this passage truth comes first, then grace, but even though the sequence is reversed, the message is the same, and it is a message worth pondering.

The passage begins with a pretty clear word of truth. The author of this theological treatise or lengthy sermon (for that it is what it is, it is not a letter) says that the word of God, which generally means scripture, is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart; it exposes us to the only One worthy to render judgment, that is - God.

That is a pretty clear word and a heavy one! So much for the idea that faith in general and the Bible specifically should always leave us pumped up and feeling good. Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not. It all depends on what word we need to hear from God, what God sees when our souls are laid bare. Some of us may think we always come off looking good, but most of us know better.

There are times for all of us when scripture must be a two-edged sword cutting through the excuses so that we can see what we need to see. It's not a matter of hearing a random word of judgment. It's about identifying the ways in which we are falling short of God's desire and thus missing the purpose and joy God intends.

The other two readings today offer such a word. The prophet Amos issues a call to justice first to the surrounding nations and then beginning in chapter 5 to Israel. His words cut like a sword through bone and marrow. The basic problem is injustice. The rich are taking advantage of the poor. And they are exploiting them not just through abusive financial practices but through a corrupt court system.

In this brief passage, Amos not only refers in general terms to people turning justice to wormwood, trampling on the poor and building luxury houses they don't even live in; he also refers to activity in "the gate" multiple times. They hate the one who reproves *in the gate*, they take a bribe and push aside the needy *in the gate*, they need to establish justice *in the gate*. "The gate" of the city is the place where the elders come to resolve disputes, it is the legal system of the day, the courtroom. If it is corrupt, Amos says, no justice can be done, especially for the poor and vulnerable. They better set things right or they will answer to God.

Jesus offers a similar word to a man who comes to him asking, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Rather than handing him a tract with the four spiritual laws or having him pray the sinner's prayer, Jesus first says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." People who know me well will recognize the second part of this response as a verse I quote often. If someone says, "I'm good," I will say, "Only God is good." Family members just roll their eyes... but Jesus said it! Of course, he said it because the man was trying to butter him up. Jesus was not so easily fooled.

Anyway, after this reality check, Jesus references the latter half of the Ten Commandments, those that have to do with how we relate to each other, and the man says he not only knows these commandments but has kept them since his youth. “Good,” Jesus says in effect, looking at him in love, “There is only one thing you lack; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.”

Like the word Amos delivers to Israel, it is a heavy word. It is meant to help the man, not hurt him or unnecessarily burden him. Mark says Jesus looks at him and loves him. We don’t know whether the issue is that this man’s possessions get in the way of him following Jesus or that an abundance of possessions is a problem for anyone when it comes to faith. Much as we might prefer the former explanation, Jesus’ subsequent words seem to indicate the latter.

“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” But no matter how we interpret Jesus’ words, they are heavy words of truth, intended to express love, but clearly a kind of tough love.

The message for us is that there are times when we need to hear a word of truth as individuals and as a society. There are some who insist that faith is purely personal and thus any reference to social concerns is inappropriate. You have to cut out half of the Bible to live comfortably with such a perspective. There are also people who are immersed in social and political issues and view this involvement as an act of faith, but live as if it doesn’t matter what is going on in their personal lives. I think of a song in the musical *Hair* where a woman confronts the father of her child for caring about matters of social justice while ignoring her. “How can people be so heartless?” she asks. There are times when we need to hear a word of truth as individuals and as a society.

In regard to individual concerns, I think of a story Frederick Buechner tells in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* about the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher. In January, 1872 he travelled to Yale to deliver the first Beecher Lectures established in his father’s memory. He had a bad

night and wasn't feeling well. So, he went to his hotel and took a nap and then at about two o'clock he got up and started to shave.

But as he looked at himself in the mirror, his face all lathered up, all that had been going on his life suddenly caught up with him. He dashed away and wrote down some insights then returned to cut himself. It was a symbol of his increased self-awareness. He had been having an affair with the wife of a parishioner. The gossip had started, his career was in jeopardy, everything he had stood for was in danger. It was a powerful moment of awakening that reoriented his life, uncomfortable to be sure, but redemptive in the long run.

But there are many areas of life in which we might need such an awakening. Perhaps, like the man who approaches Jesus, we are too bound to our possessions. Perhaps, like Jesus' disciples, we are too driven by personal agendas and not willing to consider the interests of others. Or perhaps we just claim a stronger faith than we have, professing to trust in God but deep down wanting to maintain control. Wherever and however we are blind to our own inadequacies, we need a word of truth which comes through Holy Scripture and all of life.

In regard to societal concerns, the list is almost too long to name, but we might begin where prophets like Amos begin, with the economic inequalities of our time and both the church's quiet whispers of protest and our culture's profound silence on the matter. There is no question that American poverty does not compare to global poverty, not that it's a competition, but I have been in one slum in Nairobi where about a million people live in cardboard boxes or worse all jammed together. One million... It makes you physically ill to see such suffering.

But we have poverty in this country. How can one of every six children not have enough to eat in a nation of such abundance? How can the poor and minorities still face inequities in the justice system? Why do the wealthiest Americans benefit the most from changes in the tax code? These are not just social and political issues. They are personal and religious issues, but they are difficult to talk about because most of us are rich by the world's standards and well off by our own.

It's just hard to talk about which is why I usually address such subjects through dramatic sermons like "The Rich Young Ruler" I

preached here. It's not just a matter of lowering the risk of needing a new job, if you catch my drift... it's a matter of wanting not just to proclaim God's word which is sharper than any two-edged sword, but to enable that word to be heard. Sometimes a first-person account can help us to hear the word we don't want to hear but need to hear.

But there is something else that can help us to hear, something we find in our reading from Hebrews in addition to a clear word of truth, a word of grace. In fact, there is a word of grace in all our readings today. Amos proclaims a call to justice, but he also pleads with the people to return to God, leaving room for hope, and even says that God may be gracious. Jesus tells the man who comes seeking eternal life to leave all and follow him, and then underscores the demanding nature of his call so heavily that his disciples wonder who can be saved, but then he adds that for God all things are possible.

There is grace in all three texts, but in Hebrews it is a clear word. After noting that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, the author goes on to say that we have a great high priest in Jesus who makes a way for our forgiveness by laying down his life and thus, we should approach the throne of grace, his way of referring to God, with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This is where we breathe a sigh of relief after all of this truth business. To draw from the broader theme of Buechner's book I have referenced, the Gospel may be bad news first, the news that we are sinners one and all, but it is ultimately good news, the news that we are forgiven and loved by the God who made us. We all need a word of truth at some point in life, but we all need a word of grace even more.

As my college roommate's grandfather, a Nazarene pastor, once told me, people need to know they are drowning, but we need to throw them a life vest before they drown. Or as a professor of mine once put it, most adults don't need to be told they are sinners. They need to know there is such a thing as grace.

Some of you know that Dana and I went back to Winston-Salem a week ago Saturday for me to do part of a memorial service for a long-

time, beloved member there. In the service, one of the man's sons told a story about a time when he did something mischievous as a child. And lest anyone think this was just a sign of things to come, this son is now a professor and Associate Vice-Provost at Duke University.

But one day when he was young, he was practicing his karate kicks in the basement of his home which doesn't sound too bad, but he didn't really take karate lessons and he practiced by kicking the basement window. Well, finally the inevitable happened. He broke the window, and then had to report his misadventure to his father.

His father was mowing the grass at the time, so he had to not only get his attention to tell him what he had done but also shout to be heard over the lawnmower, which added to his embarrassment. When he told his father what he had done, his father looked at him crossly and said, "WHAT!?" but not in a shaming way, more out of confusion that surely he had misheard him. He repeated the message and his father could tell he was embarrassed and so he simply said, "OK." He never mentioned it again. He could have lectured or scolded him but he didn't. He just fixed the window without further mention.

That's grace, a parental judgment that in this case the self-awareness and embarrassment were punishment enough. It wasn't an act of permissiveness that turned the son into a monster. It was a wise act of love chosen by a father who knew when grace was needed.

It is a wonderful story and an accurate description of that father, but it is also an image of the way God often works in our lives. God knows we need truth, but God knows we need grace even more, and many times we can hear the truth a lot better in the context of grace. That is, we can find the courage to examine a part of our lives that needs attention once we know that whatever is going on will not and cannot separate us from God's love, which the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Rome, tells us nothing in this world can do (Romans 8:35-39).

So, in the end, I think we should stick with the sequence – grace and truth - even though we encounter truth first in the reading from Hebrews. This is what John says Jesus brings into the world. And this is what we need.