

Dear White Christians
A Sermon on Amos 5:1-24
Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday
January 15, 2017

Introduction

Martin Luther King was certainly a prophet like Amos. I would like to honor him today by preaching on one of his favorite texts. Dr. King often quoted chapter 5, verse 24; “Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” was the translation he used. As far as I can tell, Dr. King never preached on this text, but he referred to this famous verse in several sermons and speeches.

Dr. King quoted this text often because he challenged the America of his day to practice justice in racial matters. He called for the creation of a beloved community. White mainline churches have held up the vision of the beloved community as a model for racial fellowship since the 1960s. Later in my sermon I will address how the white churches are doing in practicing racial justice.

First Move: No Justice in Israel

Amos was prophesying in the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., when the northern kingdom of Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity. This was 30 to 50 years before Israel was conquered by Assyria. There is no hint of trouble. The people are worshiping Yahweh as they thought Yahweh wanted them to worship, by conducting festivals, making burnt offerings and singing hymns of praise. It looks like a happy kingdom. The economy is good and the churches are full.

Amos addresses crowds that were gathered at Bethel for the fall festival. It was a time of national celebration. In the midst of this happy setting, Amos cries out in lament and describes a funeral for Israel. Amos warns Israel that it will die because the courts are not rendering justice to the people.

Amos condemns a corrupt legal system. He directs his remarks to the people, not the king or the priest. The people of the city were responsible for running the legal system. There were no professional judges. Trials were held at the town gate. All male residents of a village served as judges and witnesses. Their duty to serve at trials was sacred. The Ninth Commandment prohibited Israelites from bearing false witness.

Archaeology confirms a growing gap between rich and poor. Land was sacred in ancient Israel; it belonged to Yahweh. Yahweh gave each family its own plot of land to support themselves. By Amos' time, peasants are being driven off their land and sold into debt slavery. Excavations at the ancient site of Tirzah, a town in Samaria, reveal that in the tenth century, in the time of David, the village had houses of the same size, but by the eighth century, in the time of Amos, the village had one section with large, expensive houses and another with small huts.

Amos described how a merchant cheated a farmer. He adjusted the scales so they would be too light when he bought the farmer's grain. Then when the merchant sold the grain to people in the town for food, he put his thumb on the scales so that it weighed more. The farmer went to the gate to complain, but his words were hated and abhorred, even though they were true. Those who were serving as judges were taking bribes.

The people almost certainly objected when Amos accused them of cheating the poor. They may well have said, "We are sons of Abraham. Yahweh will protect us."

Amos responds, "Woe to you who desire the day of Yahweh." Some translations say, "Alas to you." Alas is a weak translation for the Hebrew word *hoy*. *Hoy* was a cry of grief for the dead. Amos is so sure that God will punish and destroy Israel that he is crying out in lament as if Israel is already dead. Amos apparently was the first person to apply a funeral lament to a group instead of to a person and to a living person standing before him instead of over a dead body.

The *hoy* was directed against those who long for the day of the Lord. This is the earliest reference in the Old Testament to the Day of the Lord. Many scholars believe that it refers to holy war in which Yahweh will deliver Israel from its enemies. Now Amos says that Israel is the enemy of Yahweh.

Amos uses an image from country life to describe Israel's false sense of security. A man flees from a lion, only to be met by a bear. A lion and a bear are deadly; a man would be lucky to escape from them. When the man miraculously escapes to the shelter of a house, he thinks he is safe. Then he rests his hand against the wall and he is bitten by a snake. The people long for Yahweh to intervene but they get death instead of salvation.

The people may have responded to Amos that they were faithfully worshiping Yahweh. Amos uses the strongest possible words to describe God's disgust at Israel's worship. "I hate, I despise your festivals." Festivals refers to the three major festivals of the religious year: Passover, Weeks and Booths. Our major festivals are Christmas and Easter. It would be as if God said, "I hate, I despise your Christmas Eve and your Easter services."

Amos uses all four senses to describe the totality of God's rejection of worship. I take no delight in your solemn assemblies, which is literally I do not like the *smell*. I will not *touch* your grain offerings. I will not *look* upon your offerings of fatted animals. Take away from me the noise of your praise songs. They are like a clanging gong. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. Israel's presence is so repulsive that God has closed off the senses of smell, touch, sight and hearing from Israel.

The issue is what is wrong with the worshipers, not what is wrong with the worship services. What goes on in society must correspond with what goes on in worship. God rejects worship from those who fail to practice justice in their daily lives.

Amos closes with the magnificent image, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amos uses the words *mishpat* and *shadeq*; they are two of the most important words in the Old Testament. *Mishpat* is justice. In Amos it refers to justice in the courts at the gates of the town. *Shadeq* is righteousness. It means being in right relationship with God and with your neighbor. You can't be in right relationship with God unless you are in right relationship with your neighbor.

Amos uses another image from the country to describe how people should respond to Yahweh. We have four seasons but Israel had only two: rainy season and dry season. Justice should roll down like floods run down the hills during rainy season. Justice should surge out of us whenever we see injustice. Righteousness should be ever-flowing, like the streams in the valley that do not dry up, even during dry season. Our relations with God and with our neighbor should be a constant, flowing stream. Water is a primal image for an agricultural society like Israel. Water was scarce and unpredictable and they relied on it to survive. Amos says that justice and righteousness are just as vital as water for a healthy society.

Second Move: No Racial Reconciliation in America

That is a powerful image: justice should flow out of us like a surging river. How are we doing in building a beloved community that is founded on racial justice?

I took my sermon title from a book by Jennifer Harvey, who teaches ethics and racial justice at Drake University. The title of her book is *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*. Harvey believes that a norm of justice is at the heart of Christian practice and identity.

She wrote her book to progressive faith communities who have demonstrated a sustained commitment to racial reconciliation. Harvey questions the way that progressive Christian churches respond to racial inequality. She writes to them because she believes that they are the white Christians who are most likely to take up the challenge of overcoming racial inequality. Progressive Christians share Dr. King's vision of the Beloved Community, a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice where brotherhood would be an actuality in all of social life.

The basic critique of the book is that the reconciliation paradigm has failed us. Faith communities have been working for racial reconciliation for 40 to 50 years and have not made any real progress.

Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America. A racially mixed congregation has been defined as one in which no single group comprises more than 80% of the congregation. Only 5% of congregations meet this definition. Mainline churches have become more white as blacks have created their own worship space. There are real differences between worship services in white and black churches. Mainline churches tend to be dry and academic; black churches are vibrant and experiential. White pastors philosophize about God, while black pastors address survival and meeting basic needs.

Harvey argues that the Beloved Community is a highly desirable goal but that white Christians are not ready for racial reconciliation. We haven't done the necessary work of examining our own racial identity. We have never seriously addressed what it means to be white.

She highlights our moral confusion about being white with two exercises. Here is the first exercise. I will ask you a question and give you a few moments to think of an answer. Identify five unique and positive characteristics that you associate with your racial identity. What are five good things about being white? Connie, what are five good things about being black? [Pause a few seconds.] What did you come up with? After being given time to ponder, most white people will experience profound discomfort with this exercise.

Some white people will try to identify their ethnic heritage (German, Italian, Irish, etc.), but this is usually too remote to be meaningful. People of color will have little difficulty with this exercise. Connie probably came up with a long list.

Exercise Two, Harvey asks this question to her students: What would you think if you saw a group of African American students carrying a sign across campus that said, Black Is Beautiful? What if white students were carrying a sign that said, White Is Beautiful?

White people are uncomfortable when their whiteness is called to attention. We can laugh about it and say white men can't dance and white men can't jump. We find it hard to find anything positive to say about being white. That is understandable. It is hard for us to separate whiteness from a long history of white supremacy. That inhibits us from doing reconciliation work. We can't bring our whole self to the table of racial reconciliation if we do not have a clear sense of self.

Race is not a self-evident category that arises from biology. It is a social construction. Race is real, but it is a man-made category. It was created in human history through legal, political, religious and economic processes.

The myths of the founding of America need to be updated. The earliest English settlers in Virginia were not seeking religious freedom—they were seeking wealth. Most of the land went to large landowners. Slaves were imported from Africa for economic reasons; the landowners needed cheap labor to work the land.

The historian Winthrop Jordan conducted research into the origins of the concept of whiteness in American history in his landmark book *White Over Black*, written in 1968. English settlers in the mid-1600s referred to themselves as Christians, to distinguish themselves from heathens and savages, who were the African slaves and Native Americans. From the mid-1600s to 1680, they referred to themselves as English and free. White did not emerge as a mark of identity until after 1680, when it was used to distinguish colonists of European heritage from African slaves. Whiteness was created to identify the players in an economic system that subjugated black-skinned slaves from Africa. Whiteness is a product of systemic violence.

Harvey suggests that to identify as white is to be complicit with white superiority. Even if whites did not own slaves, they lived on land taken from Native Americans and they refused to disrupt the institution of slavery. Slavery could not have functioned unless most whites were willing to allow it to continue.

This would have taken remarkable courage. Colson Whitehead in his new novel, *Underground Railroad*, describes what white attitudes in the South were like in the early 19th century. It was illegal to own abolitionist materials. White people who helped in the Underground Railroad were hung as traitors to their race. Slave catchers were allowed to break into anyone's home to look for runaway slaves.

White Christians used the Bible to create an ideology that God ordained some people to slavery. This added a religious dimension to whiteness.

White people struggle with the first exercise because we have not engaged in a disruption or an explicit rejection of white supremacy. White as a racial identity carries within it a moral crisis. Recognizing and acknowledging this crisis provides a starting point to address our moral confusion about race.

We should adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion about racial justice in our institutions. This is similar to the hermeneutic of suspicion that feminist scholars use in interpreting Biblical texts. The Bible was written when patriarchy saturated every aspect of society. Patriarchy is embedded in Biblical texts. If we are going to use these texts to guide us today, we must be suspicious of any interpretation of these texts that supports patriarchy.

It is the same with racial justice. Racism is America's original sin. Our public institutions—criminal justice, housing, education, our immigration system, our tax system—still have racism embedded within them. We should ask: what is the effect of this institution on people of color? People of color should have prominent places at the table when we reform these institutions.

These structures and unredressed histories continue to racialize us. By failing to address them, we allow white supremacy to constitute our identities. The reconciliation paradigm celebrates difference, but whiteness is a difference that we cannot embrace or celebrate.

Conclusion

Racism has dammed up the river of justice. It is cutting off the life forces that should be feeding our society. Justice cannot roll down like water unless we do the hard work of busting up the dams. We can't pass a law to do it.

We first must come to terms with our own whiteness. The two exercises showed that whiteness still creates a moral crisis for us. Our identity as white has its roots in white supremacy. Recognizing and acknowledging this crisis provides a starting point to address our moral confusion about race.

Let's start busting up those dams.