

**Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC**  
July 10, 2016

**The Great Debate:  
Prophet vs. Priest”**

“... Amaziah said to Amos,  
‘O seer, go, flee away ...’  
Amos 7:12

**Prelude**

There is much to address this morning.  
This past week was such a swirl of  
peaks and valleys - like few others.

It began with patriotic fervor,  
and fireworks galore;  
and then a swift and disturbing turn,  
graphic episodes of violence and death,  
followed by horrible descent into grief  
and consternation.

We have had our own incidents of violence  
and death in Fort Wayne neighborhoods,  
giving rise to the question: when will it end?  
The larger picture nationally is every  
bit as much disturbing.

Police using excessive force,  
killing civilians in the course of  
addressing minor infractions,  
giving rise to angry protests and marches.

Black Lives Matter.  
Let us be clear about this.

Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge  
didn't deserve to die the way  
or the way he died.

Phlandro Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota,  
didn't deserve to die the day or way he died,  
after being pulled over for driving a vehicle  
with a broken tail light.

And then Dallas. A peaceful protest,  
voicing concern, registering grievance.  
And then the ambush, one whose rage  
targeted law enforcement officials  
doing their job of protecting citizens  
exercising their first amendment rights.  
Five dead. Seven wounded. Two civilians.  
The deadliest day for police officers  
since 9/11/01.

Our finest and best - those who pledge to  
defend and protect - who flee to face harm,  
when others take flight.

There should be revulsion at such horror.  
We must resist any concession that  
this has become a "**new normal**"  
characteristic of life in our United States.

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There is a teaching deeply rooted in  
our human history. In ancient rabbinic  
literature (Mishnah, 2nd century CE), we  
read: "**Our Rabbis taught:  
The sword comes into the world,  
because of justice delayed and justice denied ...**"

We are a people seemingly  
more and more at war with ourselves,  
deeply flawed and fractured

a land of the free fertilized with fear,  
weeded with scorn,  
accepting of the sword,  
and the rule of the NRA,  
incapable of reconciling our differences.

It was Lincoln in his first inaugural  
address (1861) who referenced  
**“the better angels of our nature.”**  
Have our better angels fallen silent?

Marc Ellis, Jewish Liberation Theologian,  
recently posed the question:  
**“Do we really understand  
who we have become?”**  
For Ellis it was a rhetorical question,  
addressed in very different circumstances,  
yet it seems appropriate  
here and now for us.

I would say, not yet.  
There are few indications that  
our drift into angry extremes  
will soon be halted.  
It is all quite hellish - to be caught as we are  
in a vice of racial and social and religious disparity  
with so little awareness of the  
depth of our predicament,  
and with no consensus with regard to a solution.

The one solution that seems to be shared  
by oppositional parties -  
be rid of the other who so grate and irritate.  
It's a generic Brexit strategy.  
Bunker down, get out, build a wall, be done,  
cast off what troubles.

There is an alternative.

In Dallas this morning, those who read the newspaper will find this editorial reflection:

**We live together, but we do not often understand one another. This is because of class, sometimes geography, and often race.**

**We are not unique in this. Americans are living beside one another without understanding one another all over the country.**

**But in Dallas, rigid boundaries seem more pronounced. Few Dallasites in the north venture south across the river that divides our city nearly in half. This chasm has made it easier to avoid uncomfortable truths, to make nice, to paper over fundamental inequities.**

**Thursday night's events have summoned us, unbidden, to examine the consequences of knowing so little about life on the other side of these boundaries.**

*Editorial, Sunday, July 10, 2016  
Dallas Daily News*

This is a challenge that that looms in our today and every day. To examine the consequences of knowing so little about life on the other side of the mental moats we live within, and ponder how gospel would enlarge our hearts.

It is not easy work.  
But it is required of us in  
our quest to follow Jesus  
where his love leads.

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Our lesson this morning presents us with  
two conflicting religious impulses,  
two competing religious expressions.

And this is where we best be very careful.

Eugene Peterson has written:

**“Religion is the most dangerous energy  
source known to humankind. The moment  
a person (or government or religion or  
organization) is convinced that God is either  
ordering or sanctioning a cause or project,  
anything goes.”**

He goes on -

**“None of us can be trusted in this business.”**

Which is why we must - **“we must absolutely  
keep company with (the) biblical prophets.”**

They are the **“most powerful voice ever  
heard on this earth for keeping religion  
honest, humble, compassionate”**

(see *The Message, the OT Prophets in  
Contemporary Language*, p. 474).

The lesson.

We have in this corner,

Amos, a prophet;

and in this corner,

Amaziah, a priest.

Amos and Amaziah

are the contestants,

engaged in a heated conversation.

Amaziah the priest is in charge of  
the royal shrine at Bethel.

Amaziah is head of staff,

the Senior Minister.

Amos shows up on Amaziah's turf,  
and speaks in ways rather coarse,  
unflattering.

Amos is critical of the temple's donor base, specifically, the king, Jeroboam.

This faceoff took place near the mid-point of the 8th century BCE, around the year 750 BCE, give or take a decade or so.

It occurred in the northern kingdom of Israel, in a rare age of prosperity.

- No major threats were lurking on the borders.
- There were low unemployment rates.
- Business was good; market bulls were looking back, smirking at the bears. Winners looked upon the losers as weak. Losers.

This is the scene that Amos dared to enter with a word from the Lord.

Amos has a prop for his sermon this morning - a plumb line, a weighted string, straight as an arrow, which helps keep things sharp, rightly aligned.

God's been lenient and merciful, relenting of rage over life so misconstrued. But still, there is a disconnect and divide. So a line is drawn - a plumb line - and if the people stray they will stray into consequences of knowing so little the life God desires for peace to prevail.

The problem for the people?  
Market interference, a divine regulation of life that offended those benefiting a system rigged for their profit.  
Sitting atop the pyramid scheme of the day was the king.

Amos had basically said: you gotta' shape up to the plumb line of the Divine; if not, the policies of Jeroboam and the practices in his reign will bankrupt the nation. The people will disinherit the land and end up in exile.

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Amos was nothing if not faithful to his calling. He didn't just show up, spout off, and assume duty was done. He kept at it, much to the frustration of Amaziah, who complained to the king. **"The Land is not able to bear his words."** He keeps telling us we are on the road to ruin.

What will cause the ruin?

- (a) ritual motion without meaning;
- (b) an abuse of the poor, a neglect of the weak
- (c) justice delayed, justice denied.

**"Do you know what I want?  
I want justice - oceans of it.  
I want fairness - rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want"**  
(E. Peterson, *The Message*, p. 485,  
the translation of 5:24).  
Until then, spare me your songs,  
put your worship on pause.

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Amaziah got so frustrated with Amos,  
he told him to go to hell.  
Well, not exactly, but it is a loose paraphrase.  
**"O seer, go, flee away to the land  
of Judah, earn your bread there,  
and prophesy there,  
but never again at Bethel"** (Amos 7:13).

Amaziah assumes Amos makes a living being a prophet, that is properly credentialed and licensed. But Amos corrects this impression. Not so. I'm not a prophet, nor is it a family business. I'm a farmer, a tree trimmer by trade. I'm only here as a consequence of having been seized by God.

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## Conclusion

Two final thoughts.

First, words from Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) who died just a week or so ago. Who witnessed with his words and writings what it was like when the world turned into "Night."

**"We must always take sides.  
Neutrality helps the oppressor,  
never the victim.  
Silence encourages the tormentor,  
never the tormented."**

Wiesel wasn't always able to live up to his own standards. He was a literary giant, but a flawed giant. Still we can learn from him. And strive to surpass the moral plumb line he set so many years ago.

If we are to find our way within the love that compels us, we must recommit ourselves to fill the gap(s) where God's love is needed to bridge the great divides of life, for that is where the law and the prophets would have us, and that is where Jesus calls us, for the redemptive work he would have us do today.



Second, our city streets were filled with  
parade yesterday. It was all so wonderful.  
Fire trucks, bands, floats galore,  
lots of trucks, honks & horns,  
celebrating nonprofits,  
commercial enterprises,  
and labor - steel workers and the UAW;  
there were church groups,  
belly dancers, the derby girls,  
and Debrands Chocolate;  
all ages, races, abilities.  
It was a snapshot of life,  
    so many "other" than my own;  
a point of good will.  
Sweet civic harmony.  
Everybody on the their best behavior.

It was a reminder to me that  
we are one nation in the world,  
    all of us under God,  
where we can overcome,  
where we can live in peace,  
with high regard for liberty and  
justice for all.

We should never tire of  
holding on to that hope.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*