

“That’s Just the Way It Is?”

How many of you have participated in a mission trip? It could be a mission trip in the area, in the US or overseas. What are some of the feelings that you brought back from those trips?

I have participated in local mission trips in Richmond and Fredericksburg. I have been on several mission trips to West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. I have also been on mission trips to Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and South Africa. Whenever, I have returned from those trips there is inevitably the discussion of how poor people are more spiritual than we are. Some if not all in the group felt that the impoverished people we encountered were closer to God because of their poverty. I expect that people who live on the edge may put more faith in God than those who are financially safe and secure. But I am not sure that the mere lack of possessions makes one more spiritual.

Living in poverty is not a preferential way of being. Indeed, while scriptures tell us that God has a preference for the poor; this preference is most often expressed in the command for those of us who are financially secure to help out those who are in dire straits. The command is not usually to become poor, but to share with the poor.

The reading from Amos is a castigation of the wealthy who are taking advantage of the poor. Amos does not say go and be poor. He says stop using your power to hurt those who are poor. He says, “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate”. Amos is prophesying against the selfish and brutal ways of those in the Northern Kingdom. He even gives them a way out, by pointing out that if they establish justice in the land then God will look with favor upon them.

Justice and mercy are the cornerstones of what God calls for through Amos. Of course, justice and mercy are not just things that happen in a courtroom. Justice and mercy are to thrive throughout the land. It includes treating one another equitably. It includes not abusing power. It includes caring for those who are living on the edges of society. You might remember the song by Bruce Hornsby and the Range called “The Way it Is.” In the first verse the singer says “The man in the silk suit hurries by as he catches the poor old ladies' eyes just for fun he says, ‘get a job.’” That is the lack of compassion that Amos is pointing out to those in Israel and to us 2,800 years later. Given that we are still learning that lesson the chorus of Hornsby’s song may be right when he sings, “That’s just the way it is. Some things will never change.” Given the prophecy of Amos I wonder if it is not poverty that is the way of the world so much as selfishness is.

When Jesus commends a life of poverty to the man in today's Gospel he is doing so because the man is so attached to his stuff. Jesus knows that for those of us who prize our wealth or possessions more than our relationship with God are stuck. We are so bound up with the things that we own that we cannot see our way out. We think we own things, but the things own us. We are constantly taking care of the things. We have the car in the shop for repairs, we need money to pay for insurance, we need routine maintenance (oil changes and the like), and we feel the need to buy a newer model to keep up appearances. It is that way with so much of what we think we own not just cars—it includes our home, wardrobe, appliances, wine cellars, books, and so much more. We have to find a balance between owning and being owned.

The poor are not controlled by the things that they own, they are controlled by what they lack. Certainly food and adequate housing are at the top of the list for the poor. Additionally, there is the lack of adequate education and lack of opportunities to work their way up. They also deal with the stigma of poverty which includes poor education, poor nutrition, and lack of adequate clothing. It is hard to feel confident going into a job interview when your vocabulary does not measure up to your intellect, when your stomach is growling, and the best you have to wear to the interview is poorly made. You cannot wear a suit to an interview if you don't own one. And the man in the silk suit says just for fun, "Get a job."

We have two challenges to face given what Amos and Jesus said. One is the challenge of lifting up our brothers and sisters out of poverty by sharing a bit of what we have. This includes gifts to Seven Loaves, and gifts of our time to help with tutoring or volunteering in schools. It also includes looking past the lack of suit and tie to the person and giving everyone opportunities and help achieving their dream. When we lift up others we are all lifted up.

The other challenge is to get out from under our possessions. Stop buying things as if that is what will make you happy. Things will never fill the God hole in your heart. Only God will. Unburden yourself from your stuff and give the time spent on the stuff to God. We do not have to be poor to be spiritual we just need to stop living for the things.

There is a lot in these two scriptures and too few attend to them. If we do attend to these scriptures, we will be changed. It may seem perilous at first, but as both Jesus and Amos point out, it is perilous if we do not change. Listen to them and study their teachings as if your life depends on it, because it does.