

“Rivers and Oceans”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Ordinary Time/Baptism of the Lord
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New Testament Reading: Romans 8:31-35, 37-39 (The Message)

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture... None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Old Testament Reading: Amos 5:21-24 (NRSV)

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.



Sermon: “Rivers and Oceans”

Every now and then I have someone tell me that they don't like hearing politics from the pulpit. A member of my previous church told me “Pastors aren't supposed to have opinions.”

A couple of years ago, right after the Parkland School shooting in which 14 students and 3 staff members died at the hands of an armed gunman, I wrote a front page letter in the Overbrook World that asked us all to encourage our legislators to do something about that kind of gun violence. I didn't advocate for or criticize a particular position. I just asked us all to be involved in the political process to bring about change and prevent that kind of senseless violence from ever happening again. You know, as one does in a democracy. A week or two later, we got a call from a long-time member who asked to be removed from the membership rolls because she didn't like reading about politics in the church newsletter. When she was asked if that was because it expressed a political position with which she disagreed, she replied no, that she just didn't like that something “political” was being addressed at all.

Which raises some questions: “What defines an issue as ‘political’?” “What should the church be doing about big problems in the world?” “How should our faith guide our actions in areas that are considered politically volatile?”

You see, a lot of people come to church to be comforted; to be spiritually fed. They don't want to hear about or think about things that are controversial or uncomfortable in church. They especially don't like hearing that their candidate or their political party might be doing things wrong. And when we start talking about issues that are political, some people begin to worry that their pastor is using the pulpit, which is supposed to be for bringing a word from God, for the purpose of espousing his or her own personal opinions.

But here are two principles that should help address those questions I mentioned a minute ago:

1. Jesus didn't call us to be disciples on Sundays only.

And Jesus didn't call us to follow him in certain areas and at certain times only. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Take up your cross daily and follow

me. Taking up a cross is hard. And we are to take up that cross every day. Not sometimes. Not just when it's convenient. Not "as long as doing so doesn't offend me or make me uncomfortable." Daily.

There is no area of our lives that is not supposed to be guided by our faith. Being a disciple means the teaching of Christ and our Christian faith are the guiding principles in all that we do. Our government is elected by us, to represent us. And when our representatives run afoul of our Christian values, we have to speak up. We have to act.

2. Our politics and our faith address the same things.

Health care, education, hunger, housing, violence, immigration, these are all issues that are important to people. They are important to life. And they are all issues that Jesus Christ would expect us to care about because he actually spoke about them. Jesus tells the disciples "you give them something to eat." Jesus says, "blessed are the poor...and... the hungry ... and those who mourn." Jesus heals the sick and raises the dead. Jesus says "when you have done it for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it for me." Jesus says welcome "the stranger" and "love your enemies." These aren't political issues; they are life issues, they are faith issues. Why then would we abandon them to the realm of elected officials and TV news pundits?

There are lots of places in the Bible where, both directly and through the prophets, God addresses the misbehavior of Israel and in particular, the Kings of Israel. God is always about comforting God's people and challenging us. That's why we heard from Paul's comforting words in Romans just before the challenging words of Amos. They go hand in hand. God chastises and God comforts. God addresses the important matters of life and God expects us to do the same.

The passage we read this morning expresses the core of Amos' criticism of Israel. God is not pleased with the people's worship because their sins and the way they live their lives each day make it impossible for God to take that worship seriously. What have they done? They have cheated the poor and gotten wealthy in the process. They have subverted justice, by rigging the system to benefit those with power. And they refuse to listen when they are called on their wrongdoing. At one point Amos says of the Israelites that they hate the one who criticizes them and abhor the one who speaks the truth.¹

Scholar James Limburg writes that "Religion had become a matter of solemn gatherings, sumptuous feasts, sacrifices and singing, [but] nothing more. The soul had gone out of it. There was no communion with the Holy One, only a commotion at the holy place."²

And so, God says, through the prophet Amos, "I hate, I despise your festivals." The use of two words to describe a negative emotion emphasizes the depth of God's displeasure. "I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Literally, the Hebrew here translates to "what you are doing smells bad." It would be like trying to eat a gourmet meal in the middle of a sewer. It might taste great and be exquisitely prepared, but the taste is going to be overwhelmed by the odor of everything else around you. The worship of the people may, on some level, even be genuine, but God cannot appreciate it because of the overwhelming funk generated by the people's actions the rest of the time. What the Israelites have done is go through the motions of worship during the appointed times, while living the rest of their days as if their covenant with God had never happened; as if God did not exist.

The point for Amos is that for our worship to really mean anything, the things we say we believe here, HAVE to have meaning out there. If we call Jesus Lord in here, then we have to actually follow him out there. And for Amos, that means justice and righteousness. Lots of it. Not just a little bit. Rivers and oceans of it.

Which means we, the church, the people of God, have to call out injustice and wrongdoing when we see it. We have to hold those people we have chosen to represent us to account, for the times and places when they subvert justice, oppress the poor, and abuse their power. It's not enough to be supportive. It's not enough to disagree. We have to speak up. It is part of our call as Christian disciples to speak up when the people in power do not meet our expectations, even when they sometimes do.

Because that is where we find ourselves today. We have drawn up sides and there's "Us" and "Them." And when a member of "Us" runs afoul of the law or fails to meet our expectations, we tend to justify it; we tend to look the other way; we tend to excuse them because their intentions were good. We tend to hold up their failings against the good they have done. But when one of "Them" crosses the line, we tend to hold it up as just another example of how bad "they" are. It's

the same principle that guides our thinking when we give Ohio State players and coaches a pass when we would absolutely crucify Michigan players and coaches for doing the same things.

And that needs to stop. We need to acknowledge the successes and failures of all our representatives and officials regardless of party affiliation. And we can't give a pass to atrocious, evil behavior just because the perpetrator has done something to benefit "Us" in the past.

That's the decision Mark Galli made last month and he paid a price for it. Until his recent retirement, Mark Galli was the Editor-in-Chief of Christianity Today, an evangelical Christian magazine founded by Billy Graham, that boasts a circulation of 130,000 subscribers. In his editorial, Galli called for the removal of President Trump. He argued in his piece that "None of the president's positives can balance the moral and political danger we face under a leader of such grossly immoral character."³

Wow. It was a bold opinion, especially for a religious magazine that claims to value reporting on politics, while refraining from expressing overt political opinions.

But his concerns extended beyond what he characterized as "moral deficiencies" to the potential for damage to the very Gospel of Jesus Christ that the church proclaims if Christians continue to support this president blindly and uncritically. Speaking directly to these Christians, Mr. Galli wrote: "Remember who you are and whom you serve. Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior. Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump's immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency. If we don't reverse course now, will anyone take anything we say about justice and righteousness with any seriousness for decades to come?"⁴

His opinion piece brought support from some quarters of the church, but a group of 200 evangelical pastors signed a letter criticizing him and touting the things they believe the president has done to benefit the church.⁵ And that is a problem. Because no matter what policies our government has undertaken that may benefit you and me, that does not earn them the right to flaunt the law, and do harm to the very people, the "least of these" for whom Jesus urged us to care.

This past week I watched as our president ordered the assassination of the top military official of another sovereign nation offering only shifting, vague explanations as to why it was necessary. I listened as he rattled his saber threatening war against a nation of over 82 million people; the 19th largest nation in the world.⁶ Iran's capital city, Tehran, is home to almost 9 million people,⁷ which makes it slightly larger than New York City.⁸

As I listened to our leaders glibly discussing waging war in Iran I found myself wondering how many innocent people would die in such a conflagration, how many of our own sons and daughters would be sacrificed on the altar of national defense; and what about the 19 years of war in Afghanistan and 16 in Iraq makes any sane person think that beginning a new war in Iran is a good idea?

I've watched and listened while our president has demonized refugees and the poor. I've watched while he subverts justice by openly defying our legal system. He's not the only president or elected official to have done it and both parties have participated in deplorable behavior at different times, even as they criticize one another for the doing same things. But he's the one doing it now. And I wondered what Jesus would say about all that.

I appreciate that our economy is doing well, and that unemployment continues to be low. I appreciate that our president wants to keep our tax burden low and make better, more efficient use of what tax dollars the government does collect. But none of the good that may come from our elected officials earns them the right to start a war or abuse the judicial system or contribute to the suffering of the poor and oppressed.

I know some of you don't like hearing this. I take no joy in saying it. So, I do apologize if my words have made it difficult for you to feel God's presence here; to worship God here today. I know you come to church to hear good news that is comforting. People come to worship to hear that they are loved by God and that they are forgiven for their sins and that they are saved and when their time on this earth ends, that they will go to be with God in heaven. All of that is true.

And that comforting word is a big part of why people love Christmas so much, I guess. That cooing baby in a manger; the one we sing about "*The cattle are lowing the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes,*" we really like *that* Jesus, all seen and not heard; we prefer our Jesus silently smiling down on us from the stained glass, as opposed to loud and in our faces reminding us of our responsibilities.

And that's why the Bible gives us not just the wondrous power of God's love we read about in Romans 8, but also the withering criticism and challenge of the prophets, like Amos. Both are held in tension. Both illuminate our lives as disciples. God loves us just the way we are. But God also loves us too much to let us stay that way.

And that means we have to hear about and talk about things that are uncomfortable; it means we don't have the privilege of allowing the things that matter to go unaddressed by our Christian faith. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to many things, but silence is not among them.

Amos speaks God's call for justice and righteousness. And that means no one goes hungry; no one gets left out in the cold, and no one has to decide between paying the rent and paying for medical care. It means no more wars, at the very least until you finish the ones you've already started. It means no more foreign policy through violence and murder and threats of war. It means when "our side" does something wrong we hold them accountable, too. *It means no more thinking in terms of "their side" and "our side."* It means holding those who represent us accountable for actually representing what we believe. It means justice for all God's children, not just the 4 ones that look like us and think like us; everyone.

The prophet Amos calls for that justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, Peterson translates God's words this way: "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."

We have to live it ourselves and we have to demand it of our leaders and our representatives. And when they fail to do so we have to hold them accountable. And we have to do so loudly and persistently. As God expected it of God's people in the days of Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Paul, God demands it of us today. And that's not politics. That's faith.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Limburg, James. "Amos." *Interpretation: Hosea--Micah*. Ed. James L. Mays. Atlanta: John Knox, 1988. 105. Print.

² Limburg, James. "Amos."

³ Galli, Mark. "Trump Should Be Removed from Office." ChristianityToday.com, 19 Dec. 2019, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html.

⁴ Galli, Mark. "Trump Should Be Removed..."

⁵ "Christianity Today and the problem with 'Christian elitism'." 10 Jan. 2020, www.christianpost.com/news/christianity-today-and-the-problem-with-christian-elitism.html.

⁶ "List of countries by population (United Nations) - Wikipedia." 11 Jan. 2020, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_\(United_Nations\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_(United_Nations)).

⁷ "Tehran - Wikipedia." 12 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tehran.

⁸ "New York City - Wikipedia." 11 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City.