

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29; Pent. 7B; 7/11/21 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I was ordained on the evening of Thursday, August 30, 2012, at St. Ansgar Lutheran Church in Portland, ME. In that same service, I was installed to serve as Associate Pastor to the people of St. Ansgar. I vividly remember my ordination, and I vividly remember the weight of the questions Bishop Margaret Paine asked me during that service. When pastors are ordained and then installed to serve in a congregation, they are asked to promise to teach and to preach according to the scriptures and the theological tradition of the Church. I remember feeling the awesome responsibility communicated in those questions and the gravity of the promises I made. The congregation is also asked to hold the pastor to those promises and to question the pastor when it is not clear he or she is doing that. When talking to the congregation about their roll in receiving a newly installed pastor, I like the comments one Assistant to the Bishop often makes. He says, “At the same time, the congregation is also to remember that it is not the preacher’s calling to *tickle our ears* with pleasant things we want to hear; it is his or her calling from God, to rightly preach the word of truth – AND to challenge us to grow in our faith and godly actions.”

His words are fitting as we look at today’s readings. Today, I am not called to *tickle your ears* with pleasant things you want to hear, but I am

called to speak the truth. And, the truth often calls us to turn around and be open to change that enables us to grow more deeply in our understanding of faith, to be open to **being** changed and **being** made new.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Amos was not thinking about changing the world, let alone changing himself, when his life was **suddenly** changed. God called Amos to leave his family and friends, leave behind his occupation of caring for sycamore trees, and even leave his country, to prophesy to the people of the Northern Kingdom. Amos was called to speak truth to power, speak against idolatry and social injustice, and call people to live justly and return to a faithful relationship with God. He was called to warn the people of Israel that they had not met the standards – the plumb line – God had set for them, and consequently they were going to be invaded and destroyed. Now, war and conflict were not something new to the Israelites – but to lose a war, and their country, and independence, was unthinkable. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, did not like what Amos said, so he created a conspiracy theory and told King Jeroboam that Amos had conspired against the king and the very center of the house of Israel. Wow! Isn't it interesting the way these Bible stories are our stories, even to this day? Anyway, Amaziah then told Amos to go away and return to his own country. Amos answered that he was not

prophesying because he WANTED TO – he was prophesying because of God’s call, and he was doing what God had asked of him.

God called Amos to address the social injustice in the northern kingdom and call the people to change their ways. And, in today’s gruesome, grotesque story from Mark’s gospel, we find that God also called John the Baptist to address the injustice present in people’s lives and in the life of King Herod, the reigning Jewish monarch. Through the prophet John, God was calling Herod to turn around, change **his** ways, and live into a life of faithfulness. You see, Herod had taken his brother’s wife, Herodias, while she was still married to his own brother, and Herod married her himself. John had been warning Herod that **he** must change the way he was living – that he must repent and seek forgiveness from God. Well, this made Herodias livid! She was shocked that Herod would allow someone to say such bad things about him and especially HER – and she wanted John to be killed. Herod on the other hand, was puzzled by John – he did not like what he was told but, at the same time, he was intrigued and wanted to know more. The more he heard, the more Herod was drawn to John and his teachings. However, Herodias ultimately conspired with Herod to have John killed. Here we have another conspiracy that developed in reaction to truth that was spoken, reaction to John’s words when he had spoken truth

to power and privilege. It is interesting that, when Herod finally had John the Baptist beheaded, “The king was deeply grieved.” It is also interesting that Herod was someone who was truly seeking to know all that John had to say, believing just enough to keep him up at night, but NOT enough to change his way of living.

Both stories today have something in common. In our story about Amos, we discover nobody wanted to hear him. The priest threw him out of Bethel. The priest threw Amos out of the house of God because the priest did not want to hear the words of truth Amos spoke. The priest did not want to hear what God had to say, and he did not want to change his way of thinking **or** his way of living. And, like the priest of Bethel, Herod and Herodias did not like what John the Baptist said about them either. In what was probably a drunken stupor and rash oath by Herod, with Herodias conspiring and working in the background, John was beheaded because Herod and his wife did not like what they heard, and they were not ABOUT to change. In fact, the very THOUGHT that they might need to change made Herodias extremely angry.

Sometimes WE are not totally happy with ourselves. We realize that we have “weaknesses” but, for various reasons, do not really make the effort to change. Yet, the truth is that God, out of God’s overwhelming love

for us, is **always** calling us to change, to turn around and turn back to God, to grow more deeply in faith, and to be **made new**.

There was once a missionary in China whose name was Ellenita Zimmerman. Ellenita once defined the Gospel this way. She said, “God loves you just the way you are. AND God loves you too much to let you stay that way.” Yes, *God loves you just the way you are. AND God loves you too much to let you stay that way.*

As I remember my ordination and the promises I made and, as I remember the service in which I was installed to be your pastor here at Faith Lutheran Church, I also remember that I am not called to *tickle your ears* and always simply speak words that make you feel good. Sometimes, like today, the Bible readings call us to speak and proclaim hard truths. Today’s readings, especially the gospel reading, are difficult to hear. However, they call us to turn back to God. They call us as people to let go of defensive, relationship breaking conspiracy thinking. They call us to hard truth, to be truthful with one another, to share our concerns and to call people to live lives of justice in which we truly love the Lord God with all of our hearts and minds and souls, and we love our NEIGHBORS as ourselves. That means we are always called to make decisions that always show love and care of neighbor **over** our own self-interest.

Decisions like getting the Covid vaccine so our neighbor can be protected.
Decisions like probably again wearing a mask as the Delta variant grows
and becomes more prevalent.

As we begin to regather, I know we are called to have hearts and minds open to being changed and made new. And, I am reminded that the Bible, the pastor, and each of us as members of the body of Christ, remind each other of these two basic truths – *God loves you all just the way you are, AND, God loves you all too much to let you stay that way!* It is when we open ourselves, when we listen with our hearts as well as our ears, when we want and ALLOW ourselves to change, that we are ultimately transformed into the image of Christ. And, God loves us so much that God does with us that which is **impossible** for us to do by ourselves. **God** makes us NEW creatures - changed and transformed from within. God loves us so much that God will never, ever let us go. Yes, God loves us that much! Thanks be to God!