

I

Years ago, Amy and I decided to build a deck in the backyard. I'm not the world's greatest carpenter, but my uncle is really good with his hands, and so together, we set out to build a simple deck less than a foot off the ground and just a rectangle 15 feet wide by 10 feet long. As we got started setting the posts and building out the frame, I said to my uncle, "How many decks have you built?" And he looked up and smiled and said, "Well, this one and one more will make two."

We finished the initial frame, and thought we had everything right. But when we stood back and looked at the work we'd done so far, our rectangle was more of a rhombus. It turns out that if your measurement is off by less than a quarter of an inch over here, by the time you get 15 feet over there, you're off by far more than a quarter of an inch.

It was obvious to with one glance that the relationship between the corners of the posts and the deck frame weren't square, and the relationship to the deck with the rest of the house was noticeably off. We needed to get those relationships squared up and set right again before we did anything else on the project.

II

We've all had those kinds of experience, haven't we? We've been working on a project, and we suddenly become aware that we missed a step, or our initial measurements were off, or we hurried through something and called it

close enough, only to have it become painfully obvious to everyone that something was amiss, something was out of whack, something was not in its right relationship.

And before we could proceed any further, if the project was to have any hope of success, whatever that measurement that was incorrect, or whatever step that was missed, or whatever was not quite squared up, would have to be set right again.

Putting things in right relationship with one another. Fixing foundation issues. Getting everything squared up and correct again. You might say that's the business that God is in, and the business that God calls God's people to be in.

There's a biblical word for this work of putting things in right relationship with each other – a word called justice.

That word is also a hot-button word in our culture right now. In recent months, there have been marches and demonstrations across the nation and across the street calling for justice. These days, to refer to someone as a justice warrior is either a compliment or a putdown, depending on which side of the culture wars you happen to be standing. Every day, there are headlines about the latest developments with high profile court cases and the activities of the US Department of Justice and the list goes on. Justice is one of those words that is front and center in our lives these days.

At its core, the word justice has to do with setting things in right relationship with each other. For example, when you justify a piece of text in a document, you're placing that piece of text in relationship with the margins of the page. When you justify an item on an expense report, you're asserting that the charge was for the correct amount and for the correct purpose. The word justice has everything to do with putting things in right relationship. And it's not too much of a stretch to say that God is a God of justice. God is a God who puts things in right relationship and expects us to do the same. And that brings us to our text from the prophet Amos.

III

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, often also called the Old Testament.

After King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam came to the throne, and things began to fall apart. Solomon had already been hard on the people, taxing them heavily and even conscripting them as laborers in order to construct the Temple. But rather than easing up on the people, Rehoboam doubled down on them, and the fragile union of the twelve tribes fractured. When the dust settled, ten of the original twelve tribes formed their own nation. Within biblical history, during this time they are referred to as the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They set up their capital city in a place called Samaria.

Meanwhile, the two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, kept the city of Jerusalem as both their political and religious capital, and they became known as the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

And so that's how things operated in the period of the divided kingdom – the northern kings ruling from Samaria, and the southern kings ruling from Jerusalem. And for a time, things were OK. Both kingdoms began to trade with neighboring nations, and that trade and commerce brought some prosperity. The people addressed all of the required religious observances. They priests said all the right prayers on all the right days. From the outside looking in, everything seemed fine.

But all was not fine. The relative peace with neighboring nations and the trade and commerce had brought with it prosperity and security, but only for some of the people of God, while others still scraped by with subsistence farming. In those days, only men had legal rights, and so widows and orphans were incredibly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Furthermore, the people held all the right observances on all the right days, and the priests said all the right prayers at all the right times, but their hearts weren't in it. They were just going through the motions of worship, begrudgingly and out of a sense of obligation, rather than with joy and gratitude.

Things looked fine from the outside, but things were not fine. Not fine at all.

For the next few weeks, we're going to be reading from a genre of biblical literature called the prophets. Oftentimes, we think of prophets as predictors of future events. And there is some element to that in the biblical prophets.

But more often, God uses prophets as messengers, those who are sent to warn the people and their leaders that they have strayed from the path of God, and to call them back to God's ways of being in the world.

And such is the case with the prophet before us today, a prophet by the name of Amos. Like most of the prophets, we don't know much about Amos' backstory. We know from the text that Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. He was from the southern kingdom of Judah, but sent with a message from God to the northern kingdom of Israel, about 760 years or so before the birth of Jesus.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Amos 1:1 and 5:14-15 and 21-24.

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

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; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even 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.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I had a conversation with someone the other day who I told me that they find much of the biblical story to be confusing and confounding.

And truthfully, much of it is. The bible is a strange book, written long ago and far away, by and to a people who were in many ways very, very different than us. In many places, the bible seems to contradict itself.

But there are some threads that are consistent throughout the bible from beginning to end. There are some things about which God clearly cares about deeply. And one of the threads that runs consistently through the whole biblical story is that God cares deeply about how

we treat one another, especially those who are the most vulnerable among us.

And that's what's being underscored here in Amos. The people of God have gotten a few things right. Some of them have achieved a little prosperity. They're enjoying a season of relative peace with their neighbors. They're getting to worship on time, and they're giving sacrificially, and the priests are saying all the right prayers at all the right times. From the outside looking in, everything looks good.

But God sees the problem and calls it out. The people are not living justly. That is, they are not living in right relationship with one another. They are not treating the most vulnerable among them with special attention and care.

And so God says, take away all your songs and your harps and your offerings from me. It's all just noise until you let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

Until you get the relationships right, until you fix the foundational issues, nothing else is going to matter.

IV

I wonder, friend. I wonder if there's something in your life right now that is a little off. I wonder if there's a place in your life where you know you've missed a step, or you know you've overlooked something, or you know it wasn't quite right, but you went on anyway and hoped no one would notice.

And maybe they won't.

But God will. God always knows.

You can't hide from God, my friend. You can't go through the motions and think God won't notice. Believe me. I've tried. God sees right through it.

God is in the justice business. God is in the business of putting things in right relationship again. And here's the good news. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has already put you in right relationship with God again. God has justified you in Christ. The fancy theological phrase for this is that you have been justified by grace through faith.

That is, you were not set in right relationship with God by your own doing. You were not justified because you said the right prayers, or because you gave enough money, or even because you received the sacraments of the church. You were justified, that is, you were put in right relationship with God, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

You didn't do anything to deserve it. You didn't do anything to earn it. That's why they call it grace – because it was a free gift.

God is in the justice business. And God has justified you through Jesus Christ. And so your job then, is to be in the family business. Your job is to put things in right relationship again. Not because you're afraid of God's wrath, but because you're so grateful for God's grace.

Because you have been justified by God's grace through faith in Christ, then you can be about the work of fixing the things that have gotten bent out of shape. You can be about the work of straightening up the foundations. You can be about the work of making sure that those in your life who have less power and voice than you do are protected and cared for, because that's justice work that God has freed you to do.

But don't wait, my friend. Don't think that the quarter inch you're off today won't matter or be noticed. Get your relationships right. Make that phone call. Write that letter. Do the work of justice in your own life, you've been set free and made right again by the ever-flowing justice and mercy of Jesus Christ.

V

As we enter our third century of mission and ministry together here at First Presbyterian Church, the context in which do that mission and ministry in the years to come will be very different than anything we have known before.

As many of you know, I live with two ten-year-olds and a seven-year-old. I had the privilege this morning of spending time with a dozen or so 8th and 9th graders in our church's confirmation class. I think and pray often about our kids and the world in which they are coming of age, and I listen closely to how they think about and engage with our world.

And as I spend time with our kids, I see that their generation has an innate sense that that there is much in this world of ours that is off-kilter, that is out of balance, that needs adjusting before anything else is built upon it.

And my hunch is that for them and their peers, the church can have develop all the best programs and facilities that money can buy, but if the church isn't committed to the work of squaring things up, of putting things right, of fixing some of the foundational issues of our world – in other words, if the church isn't committed to joining God in the family business of doing justice – well, they've got lots of other things to do with their time.

My hunch is that these kids know the same things that we all know deep down– namely that the world is thirsty for justice and righteousness. Thirsty for it. Not just for a trickle. Not just for a spritz.

The world is thirsty for justice to roll down like waters. The world is thirsty for righteousness to flow like an ever-flowing stream.

The world is thirsty for the church to be and to do what it says it is called to be and do – to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world – the one who says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.