Amos 5:18-24

Righteous Anger

Sunday February 4, 2018

Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell

Pilgrim Church, Harwich Port

In our church, we begin our services with a statement of welcome and articulate our vision of welcome for all people. In this time of racial tension in our land people of faith begin to see that there are strong feeling when it comes to race. Everyone from football players who take a knee to Oprah Winfrey at the Golden Globes – have shown us the depth of their unwavering commitment to racial justice, and the pain of their experiences in this land. The leaders of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, have challenged all of our congregations across the country to do a soul search, to have church-wide conversations about wide our welcome really is.

 Today we begin with a powerful reading from the prophet Amos. It was a favorite of Dr. King and the bulletin shows it on one of the walls at the King Memorial Building in Washington DC. King was quoting a man who lived 700 years before Jesus. King was quoting a prophet who was hopping mad. Amos came from a small town in the south of Israel, but he preached his message of judgement to the prosperous people of Northern Israel – in Bethel and Samaria. Amos did not think of himself as a prophet but a humble farmer who was smitten by God’s word. He could see that the people put too much value on their prosperity and had forgotten God. They assumed they could buy God’s grace with big gifts to the temple, but Amos told them God could see through that.

 What upset Amos the most was the way they had forgotten the plight of the poor. He called their worship services empty. He called their faith hypocritical. He thought their pious assemblies were hollow and devoid of integrity. The covenant with God was always about justice and fairness. Let’s take a closer look.

In the first place, the Bible says there is a time and place for Righteous Anger. Last week I read a story to the children about a march to end segregation in Birmingham AL in May 1963. Dr. King spoke to a crowd at a church in Birmingham. He announced an upcoming march to end segregation. Whole families came that night to hear the now-famous preacher. When he announced the new march parents rose to say they could not afford to lose time at work or risk being fired. When the youth saw how torn their parents were they volunteered to march. It was called the Children’s March. 10000 youth were jailed over the course of 3 days. It was a calculated risk on Dr. King’s part. It was risky to send children into the melee. But Dr. King was an effective leader because he understood that this spectacle of children marching would turn things around. When white people saw the police turn water hoses on children and then arresting children by the hundreds the nation rose up in anger. President Kennedy was appalled. The righteous indignation of reporters, government officials and the general public finally put an end to segregation. It took anger.

This week when fans arrive in the mall around the Super Bowl stadium they will see something new. A display at the Minneapolis Central Library on the mall entitled *Testify: Americana from Slavery to Today*. This display was created and produced by Alan Page and his wife. Page is a former NFL Hall of Famer who played for the Minnesota Vikings and went on to a distinguished career as an attorney and justice on the Minneapolis Supreme Court. Over the years in his Supreme Court chambers he began to collect artifacts from the Jim Crow south. This display, *Testify* includes a slave collar, a branding iron, signs pointing to colored rest rooms, photos of Black children that are insulting and degrading. Why has he put together this display on the mall near the Super Bowl stadium? " In a time when white supremacy is raising its ugly head, in ways that Page hoped he would never see again, he says,

"We hope the exhibit will challenge people by seeing what took place in the past, and challenge them in ways that will cause them to think about taking action, …to end the effects of that past, the effects that still linger today," "These items represent facts," he said. "Not somebody's opinion about what happened. Not somebody's view about what did or didn't occur, but actual facts. ... They help people understand where we are today. The disparities in education, our criminal justice system.” Page says, “we haven't come to grips with the discrimination that comes, that came with those facts. We haven't addressed the present effects of that past history, the present effects of that past discrimination." <https://www.timesunion.com/news/education/article/Alan-Page-exhibits-slavery-artifacts-in-time-for-12538869.php> Amos believed people could not build a secure future built on a lie. If you cannot be angry at injustice eventually you collude with the status quo, and never differentiate yourself from it. Sometimes you have to tell the hard-edged truth today to build a better world for tomorrow.

Secondly, Anger is hard to take. A lot of people are afraid of anger because it seems out of control. It runs hot and visceral. It has fire in its belly. Anger was King’s blessing and his curse. When Martin Luther King made his I Have a Dream speech it was inspiring and everyone loved him but he could also push our leaders, and he could be impatient for justice. King was not content to preach and pray. When King used his anger to force people to see hard truth and bring change. But his forcefulness threatened the status quo and that led to regular death threats and finally his assassination. Real discussions about racism will not be polite.

Morgan Jerkins is a recent graduate of Princeton A linguist and writer, she tells of a lunch where a white man challenged her. “I just don’t understand why you call yourself a Black woman instead of a human being. You are a scholar and have studied at Princeton.” Taken aback Jerkins recalls June 2013. While studying in Japan she heard about the verdict in the trial of the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin. When she heard on social media on the other side of the world that George Zimmermann had been acquitted for killing Martin, on the other side of the world she grew frightened afraid of the nightmares she felt sure would flood her sleep. There was no place where she could be in all the world where she could escape her race. White people were asking her to pretend that racial prejudice was dead or easily transcended. The man who challenged her at the luncheon over spinach salad was asking her to stop being angry because her anger made him uncomfortable. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/why-do-you-say-youre-black.html> Any progress we make will demand a quiet resilience – the ability to listen to anger and love people on all sides no matter what.

Finally, the Bible says Holy Anger is sacred. Righteous anger is different from self-indulgent anger, or dramatic anger. Amos used his anger to expose hypocrisy, to tell the truth and to inspire. The first day of February is the beginning of Black History Month and the day which marks the birthday of a poet and prophet, Langston Hughes. (He would have been 116 this week.) A dreamer who loved Harlem and his people with a fierce, unapologetic love Langston Hughes wrote poems that ring with righteous anger. They tell of his dreams but also his demands.

“I tire so of hearing people say, Let things take their course. Tomorrow is another day. I do not need my freedom when I'm dead. I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

 “Americans of good-will, the nice decent church people, the well-meaning liberals, the good-hearted souls who themselves wouldn’t lynch anyone, must begin to realize that they have to be more than passively good-hearted, more than church going Christians, and much more than word-of-mouth in their liberalism.” https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/opinion/langston-hughes-birthday.html

It is all well and good to say that we welcome everyone. Every church says that. But the proof is what we do about it. Dr King was famous for saying that the most segregated hour all week in most American cities and towns was the hour when folks were in church. So we are challenged to think about bias, subtle and unconscious. We would be wise to listen to the prophet Amos. “I reject your festivals. I don’t enjoy your assemblies. I won’t look at your offerings of well-fed animals. I won’t listen to your music. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” We can do this. I know we can.

Announcements

Whoever, wherever – whatever team you root for tonight – you are welcome here today….

Ann – Thrift Store

Announce – Sign up for next Wed. luncheon with a film on forgiveness – Then I Rise.

Sign up for next Sunday’s luncheon – program sponsored by the Peace and Justice Committee – Birth of a White Nation…

Sermon series on race – We have one more sermon next week and I would like to get your ideas and experiences. Send me an e-mail, idea, question or story to share.

The Cape Cod Times mentioned that the Archbishops of Philiadelphia and Boston Have placed friendly bets on tonight’s game. They will donate $100 to the charity of the other and exchange Philly cheese steaks or lobster depending who wins…Hope your afternoon is fill with good fun, good humor and sense of connection to your community and family.

Pastoral Prayer

Your healing powers walked the earth in the person of Jesus. But he did not walk alone and he blazed a path and left a trail. In every age you have called ordinary prophets and enlightened leaders from all walks of life to walked with the tender tread of mercy, and loved justice more than life.

We ask your blessing on Doug Wade – in hospice, on Abby Canada recovering from surgery on her legs. Janet on the mend in rehab after a tough week, …

Restore our nation and build up those who work for healing in the land. Strengthen all our leaders that they find opportunities to advocate for the least, welcome the stranger, and even the playing field in this good land. We pray for all the people of the earth, and ask that our world might rise up with new courage to face the issues of our time.

Bless us with the wisdom to see what really matters that we won’t be so distracted by the sparkly things in life.

Amen