

Bruton Parish Church
July 11, 2010
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson

In the name of and for the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. † Amen.

Consider with me the collect that we prayed just a few moments ago. {Read the collect}. As beautiful as the prayer is, the third person wording may contribute to missing the full impact of the prayer.

In this collect, we actually pray that we may know and understand what things we ought to do and that we may have (the) grace and power faithfully to accomplish them. This is a powerful and a dangerous prayer. Asking to know what we really ought to do with this Gospel covenant we claim to live in, could provide us with answers hard to hear and harder to live.

When the lawyer in today's Gospel reading stands up to test Jesus, he asks the right question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" – a question to which he already knows the answer from the law. When Jesus turns the question back on him, he draws phrases from Deuteronomy and Leviticus to answer. "He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'"(Luke 10: 27). How familiar he was with those words, how often he had heard them. How familiar we are with those words, how often we have heard them. But the hearing is not the thing. Jesus said, "You have given the right answer, do this, and you will live.

The image of the plumb line that introduces today's reading from Amos sets a standard of alignment in covenant with God. A covenant that transcends religious words and claims of being chosen and that calls for life hallmarked by those same words that the lawyer in the Gospel knew so well.

The remainder of the Amos reading is filled with threats of desolation, waste, death by the sword, and exile for the nation of Israel, all under the preface, "Thus says the Lord! Unfortunately, the revised lectionary does not allow us to become acquainted with the rest of the prophet's work. The entirety of the book of Amos begins to be wrapped up in these visions of destruction. However, what Amos is actually addressing is the social and economic injustice that is the norm in the nation – the oppression of the "have-nots" at the hands of the "haves." Throughout the book, this simple farmer-prophet has been describing how far outside the covenant of love the Northern Kingdom, Israel is living. He calls them to change and correctly predicts that those conditions will contribute to the fall and exile of the nation at the hands of the Assyrians not too many years hence.

The events that Amos predicted and that happened to the Northern Kingdom more than seven hundred years before Jesus was the beginning of the enmity that arose between the Samaritans and the Jewish people and that persisted to Jesus day, indeed that persists until today. After the Assyrians conquered the kingdom, the Samaritans became those who intermarried with pagans, did not remain pure, and built an alternative temple. They were unclean heretics and social outcasts – the ultimate lesser people.

For Jesus to set forth such a person as the obvious practitioner of the truth of God’s covenant was to challenge every convention of this lawyer’s understanding of what was right and proper. He had complete knowledge of the law and the covenant, but he clearly had established boundaries of how to interpret this troubling “love of neighbor” requirement. Although the particular issues have changed, the enmity and division remain. A review of a modern day map will show that the area of Samaria is today the Palestinian West Bank. The conflict that resides there is but one example in our own world of the kind of divisions we create to categorize and define our fellow humans to decide how we will interact with them and who to set aside. We have our own – skin color, ethnicity, nationality, social and economic class, religion, sexual identity, political persuasion; the list goes on – any difference can be used and often in the name of God. But Jesus declares that no such difference can divide us in the love of God and no such difference can be declared in the name of God.

In our collect, we pray for the grace and the power to accomplish that which we ought to do. Grace comes to us as an unencumbered gift from God, but grace not connected to power will be unable to equip us truly to live, as we ought in covenant with God. God does not encumber grace, but we can if we do not use it. If I present you with a gift powered by electricity, it is yours to keep without strings. If it remains on a shelf never plugged in, it will be useless for its intended purpose. Such is the grace given by God; we must empower it in our lives in the way that Jesus describes in the person of the outcast Samaritan.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke out and acted boldly against fascism, but also against Christian complacency. Bonhoeffer was executed for his stand against the Third Reich and for participating in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler. Although only 39 years old when he died, Bonhoeffer’s extensive writings and activist Christianity have made him one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. His writings challenge the 21st century church to rise up and take its place in Gospel proclamation to a world in trouble.

He wrote, “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church... (it is) the grace we bestow upon ourselves...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” He lamented the fact that his nation had become Christian without discipleship. The following of Christ could not hold without the commitment to live for Christ above and beyond the nation.¹ Bonhoeffer called for a costly grace that stands for something.

¹ Bethge, Eberhard. *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Harper Row. 1979. 151

On April 3, 1968, just 24 hours before he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, our own modern day prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King used Amos' words to call a sick, troubled, and confused world to a better day. The call of Dr. King was the same as that of Amos, a call away from injustice and oppression. He declared that all are needed for the work and he asserted that all... "preacher(s) must be ... Amos, and saith, 'When God speaks who can but prophesy?...Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"²

Justice and righteousness will not roll down unless we are the catalyst. We, by our covenant, are God's agents in a broken and hurting world. This sermon is a continuation of the one I preached three weeks ago. What we are called to is an activist faith and a presentation of the truths of the Gospel to our world. Such a faith is potentially dangerous because we will have to stand squarely against conventional wisdom and prevailing trends. It is not easy to set aside our own treasured categories, but we can with God's help.

Jesus said, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man." The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Blessed be the name of God.

² From "*I've Been to the Mountaintop*" delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3, 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.