

Sermon – 7/14/18
“God’s Lavish Love”
Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14
8th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
John Ryan, Associate Pastor for Faith Formation

Imagine back to 1950 right here in Davidson. The then, church building built in 1885 that faced Main Street had just been demolished to make way for our current building. You had probably seen drawings of the new building. You knew in your mind what it was going to look like. But it was not until you physically saw the walls beginning to rise from the ground did all the hard work of the building committee and architects begin to seem real. It was time to hand the work over to the builders, the skilled craftspeople who would take that vision and make it a reality.

Van Lear Logan remembers *“I was most impressed by the steeple. It arrived in town by train and for several days lay in the grass along the railroad track until it was transported to the church. It was the most beautiful new copper color.”* Lacey Dick says *“I am assuming it was 1952 and I clearly remember the raising of the steeple. It was a gleaming copper color. I was about 14/15 at the time. We stood about where the CVS parking is now and watched it go up. There must have been a crane to hoist it up.”* If you look on your bulletin cover, you’ll see the crane Lacey remembers as they lay the framework for the steeple.

Jane Holland remembers *“walking through the chapel and sanctuary with her grandmother Chester Bell Withers and her best friend Grace James whose picture is in the church library. Both were the consummate church ladies and were curious about the progress of the new church and were not the least deterred by a construction site where there were no floors to walk on yet, so boards and I would imagine cinder blocks provided pathways around the church.”* None of this would have been possible without skilled workers who knew how to lay bricks straight and true. If you have ever been on a mission trip and had the opportunity to build a house or been on a Habitat build, one of the things you must know how to use is a plumb line. Even our smart phones today, at least my iPhone has a plumb line app. A plumb line is a cord that has at one end a weight and is used to determine if vertical structures are true. Biblically, it is also used symbolically to refer to the divine standard against which God, the builder of God’s people, tests and judges them. It also symbolizes the standards by which God will rebuild God’s people.

Today’s Old Testament text is hard to hear. Imagine hearing Amos back then and it is not surprising that we tend not to focus much on Amos when we preach. No one likes to hear doom and gloom, especially in the summer. Amos is tough. He’s blunt. Amos says things no one much wishes to hear. The religious establishment is not happy with Amos’ message and it wants him to just disappear. Amos prophesies to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the long reign of Jeroboam II, which was a time of prosperity. Amos is concerned about the concentration of wealth among the urban elites, and he repeatedly refers to their luxury goods as indicators of their moral decay. “Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the middle of my people Israel, I will never again forgive them.”

Readers of Amos often zero in on God’s anger and rightly so. God’s deep concern for human injustice is expressed in Amos in language of judgement and threat: “The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” says Amos 3:8. But God is not angry for the sake of being angry, and God’s anger is not in opposition to God’s love.

I don’t know about you, but for much of my young life I was trouble by the God I read about in the Old Testament. I mainly saw a God of wrath and vengeance. A God who destroyed the world in a great flood. A God who set vipers upon God’s people for complaining about their journey in the wilderness. A God who let Moses see the Promised Land but not enter it. And the list goes on and on. So troubled by my view of this Old Testament God, I remember having a conversation with my Old Testament professor while I was a student of at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education. I asked why we could not just focus on the New Testament and the God of love, that is so evident there. It would be so much easier. And as any good educator would, she assigned me a paper to write! Carol asked me to look in the Old Testament to where God’s actions showed love, concern and mercy for all of

God's people. As I wrote that paper I was completely surprised by what I found, and it did change my view of the God of the Old Testament. I did find a God of love and mercy.

As theologian James Cone, who was a professor of theology at Union Seminary in New York City writes, "Most theological treatments of God's love fail to place proper emphasis on God's wrath, suggesting that love is completely self-giving without any demand for obedience. Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace." God's love demand righteousness, and breaches of God's call to justice and love cause God grief. As Amos is keen to show us, God is not indifferent to human suffering, oppression, and injustice.

In the verse that immediately precede our Old Testament passage for today, God twice relents from the planned punishment of the northern kingdom of Israel after Amos reminds God "How can Jacob? He is so small?" When Amos is commanded by God to confront Israel with its misdeeds, the kingdom is living in a period of unprecedented wealth, power and prestige. Many of us live in similar context here in North America. Possessing power in the world is an assumption we carry around in our pocket like a driver's license. We might not exactly call ourselves big shots, but we would probably say we call all the shots in our lives. How big are we? Big enough to handle most of what comes along, we reply.

In this showdown between Amos the shepherd and Amaziah the priest of the most important shrine in the kingdom, the issue at stake is who does indeed call the shots. Is it us, as so often we believe or is it God? The theological weight of this passage lies in the strong image at its beginning – the plumb line laid against a wall. God promises to set a plumb line in the people's midst and never to pass them by again. The note of judgement is unmistakable. God will lay waste Israel's religious and political establishment, for it is warped and has fallen beyond repair. But there is also the note of God's faithfulness to God's people, then and now, - **God still calls them, "my people."** The threat of judgement is bound up with the promise of God's presence. Even in judgement there is love.

Our New Testament text from Ephesians today in the original Greek, all 11 sentences form one single sentence, with clause, after clause describing the ways in which God has blessed us and the implications of these blessing for our lives. Our modern translations break the passage up into multiple sentences, but if you want to get a sense of how the original syntax actually worked, read the Authorized King James Version of the passage, which mirrors the Greek.

Did you remember all those verbs, the actions of God? God blessed, chose, adopted, graced, delivered, lavished, revealed, gathered, gave an inheritance, and marked. And the object of each of those verbs? US, humanity . . . God blessed us, God choose us, God adopted us, God gave us grace, God delivered us, God lavished us, God revealed to us, God gathered us, God gave us an inheritance, and God marked us. That is utterly extravagant! It is like the end of a fireworks show. All the big, beautiful colors, exploding one after another, different and yet each beautiful and awe inspiring. Paul was serious, passionate, almost overwhelming in his description of God to the people of the church at Ephesus. He did not want them to miss who this God is! That is a crazy thing about God, God is lavish in love.

When you think back and remember your grandmother or grandfather, if you knew them, what do you remember? What are the smells, the touches, the memories you have? I would imagine for most people it might be apple pie, fresh bake cookies or maybe pipe tobacco. For me, that wasn't the case. My grandmother owned a newspaper, in an era when most woman did not own newspapers, inheriting it from her father in 1953 and I like to think of her like the Katherine Graham of the Washington Post, but maybe not as glamorous! She did all the photography for the paper, so when I close my eyes, the smells I associate with her are chemical smells of F-stop fixer and other dark room supplies. Regardless, grandparents often have that quality to make you feel special, like royalty. They spoil you. Give you gifts when maybe you do not deserve them.

I think God is like the most fantastic grandparent, aunt or uncle ever. So full of love for us that God treats us like we are the ones deserving of praise instead of us giving God the deserved praise. We are God's beloved ones. The ones God blesses and choses and adopts and heaps grace upon, redeems, lavishes, gives riches we did not earn, and marks as God's own. US! And all with no actions of our own. Thanks be to God.

Does that blow your mind? Is it difficult to believe? We are God's beloved ones. The whole world is God's beloved ones. The truth is while we may be able to say that we are blessed or chosen or given grace, we also live lives of trouble, loneliness, and failures too. None of us gets through life unscathed. It can be hard to believe we are beloved of anyone, much less the Almighty who created us.

But even if we can get there, or partially get there, to believe that God loves us unconditionally, what do we do with that truth? Paul has a suggestion in verse 12 he says "live for the praise of God's glory." Does that mean we all need to have the words "God is good all the time" tattooed on our arms when we are confirmed or say "Glory be to God" in response to everything in our world? Maybe. But I suspect the best way to live a life for the praise of God's glory is to focus on what God is doing in our world. To look for ways that you, I, each of us, and all of us together, can see God moving in our world and jump into that work.

So, what does that look like? Where do we find God in the world today? First of all, if you are like me, either avoiding the news or buried in my phone and not noticing the world going by, put the phone down and be present. Take notice of what's going on around you, both good and bad. Be present with those you are with and together look for God because God is there. Second, look for the good in people and in situations. Sometimes this can be hard and difficult, but it is our call, to show the love of God to all people, even when we do not want to and especially with people we disagree with. 1 John 4:19 says "We love because God first loved us." We live praising lives of God's love because we have been lavishly loved as God's beloved ones.

Michael Lindvall, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, wrote a book called "*The Good News from North Haven*." The book is a series of short stories about the life of a Presbyterian pastor in a small town. The following is called "The Christmas Baptism":

"One Sunday one of my stalwart elders, a silver-haired pillar of the congregation, Angus McDowell, asked to speak with me about calling a special session meeting. He wanted to have the elders approve of the baptism of his grandson. Now I knew that this family lived 2000 miles away in Spokane, Washington - but since everyone was coming for Thanksgiving and everyone's going to be in town, it's a good time, as Angus put it, "to get him done." Now there is a certain logic to the way we Presbyterians do baptism. We don't do our baptisms privately, we do them publicly with the congregation because you act as corporate godparents. You commit to sharing the faith and supporting the family as they raise the child. As I talked with Angus, I shared the concern that it was best for a child to be baptized in the church in which he would be raised. I said, "They've been living there for nine years, Angus. Wouldn't it be best to baptize him there?" Angus listened, and he shook my hand and thanked me for my time. And fool that I was, I thought the matter was settled.

But I was wrong. I found out that my kind but strong-willed elder talked to the other elders about having a special session meeting to approve the baptism and I was invited to stop by if I so wanted. So, I did. And the motion passed.

Now this particular congregation has a tradition. When a child is baptized, the pastor asks the extended family, "Who stands with this child today?" And those in the family rise and remain standing throughout the ceremony. So that morning I asked the question and little Angus' parents and siblings rose along with Grandpa Angus and his wife and the other grandparents and some cousins. Everything proceeded as normal. The service was soon over and everyone was anxious to get home.

As I prepared to leave, I stopped by to turn off the lights in the sanctuary and I saw a middle-aged woman sitting in the front pew with a black purse in her lap. She looked familiar to me. But I realized I did not know her name. She looked down at her purse and she said, "My name is Mildred Corey", and then she added, "What a lovely baptism that was." And then she was quiet and finally she said, "My daughter, Tina, just had a baby and shouldn't this child be baptized as well?" I was eager to get home, so I said, "Of course. Have Tina and her husband call me and I'll be happy to talk with them about it." She looked down and said, "Well, Tina's got no husband. She was confirmed here four years ago. She used to come to Fellowship and then she dated this older boy, and..." And then she stopped talking and I waited. And finally she said, "She got pregnant and wanted to keep the baby and wants to have him baptized in her home church. But she's afraid to talk to you about it and so I thought I'd come to you." I looked at Mildred and I said, "I'll bring the matter to the Session."

I wondered what that meeting would bring given my experience with Angus' baptism. I will admit I was in a feisty mood. I explained Tina had been confirmed here. She wasn't married and the father hadn't been named to me. I shouldn't have worried because it's a small town and everybody else knew who the father. But still some elders asked, "Will she keep her commitment when she has her child baptized to be here in the church?" So given my experience the week before, I said, "Well, after all her son and she lives in this town where we could give them support." I wanted to say, "and not in Spokane," but they all knew what I was thinking. But I think what all of us wondered deep within was how lonely that moment would be with the young teen mother and her own mother being the only ones standing when the question was asked. But they approved the baptism.

So the Sunday before Christmas came, and as it is at that time of year, the church was full. After the sermon the elder who was to assist stood up and joined me and said, "Tina Corey presents her child for baptism." She came down the aisle with little Jimmy in her arms and would only look at me with a nervous smile and the scene did hurt every bit we thought it would, "so young, so alone," was what we were all thinking. I read the opening words of the sacrament and then I asked, "Who stands with this child?" and I nodded at Tina's mother who slowly stood up and returned my smile. Then my eyes went back to the book to ask Tina the questions of commitment. I sensed some movement going on in the pews and I looked up and to my surprise Angus McDowell had stood up and his wife, Minnie. And then a couple of other elders and a sixth grade Sunday School teacher and a new young couple, and soon, before my eyes, the whole church was standing up for little Jimmy. And Tina began to cry and her mother held on to the pew as though she was standing on the deck of a rolling ship in a great wind, which in a way, she was. For the Spirit was moving, blowing where it will and it had moved people in the most surprising ways. At first, the unexpectedness of the routine was unsettling, but then we all seemed to move into a quiet reverence, even little Jimmy who had been wiggling and squeaking. And as the water touched his forehead, he seemed to sense the importance and power of the moment. The water rolled onto his hair and then his nose and then his cheek, and his eyes were fixed as though he was concentrating on something. Every other eye was on him, who was, for this moment, everyone's baby.

I looked up and I noticed Angus straining to see the child from several pews back with an open-mouthed smile. And I thought to myself, maybe that's what Angus understood and I did not—that out there in Spokane, his grandson would have others to watch him grow and Angus would be here to help Jimmy grow.¹

That's that kind of lavish love that Paul wants us to experience in Christ. The kind of love that transcends time and place and boundaries. And it is the kind of love that Amos wants us to know about God, a God who will not abandon us, a God who still calls us "my people." And that is what we must do. Be open to receiving that love, even when we do not feel we deserve it and even more importantly, sharing that love with everyone we meet. That is our call. That is our mission. That is our blessing². Amen.

¹ The Christmas Baptism," from *Good News from North Haven* by Michael Lindvall, published in 2002 with some commentary and use of poetic license.

² Source Material provide by Rev. Erin McGee, First Presbyterian Church, El Campo, TX.