

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 10, Year C (track one)

First Reading

Amos 7:7–17

This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“Behold, I am setting a plumb line  
in the midst of my people Israel;  
I will never again pass by them;  
the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,  
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,  
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said,

“Jeroboam shall die by the sword,  
and Israel must go into exile  
away from his land.”

And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.

“You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel,  
and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’

Therefore thus says the LORD:

“Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city,  
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,  
and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line;  
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,  
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Colossians 1:1–14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Luke 10:25–37

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And 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.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” (ESV)

## Questions and Comments for Discussion

### First Reading

This reading is tough. I’m betting that a lot of clergy, looking at our choices for this week, will look at “Track Two” and go with Deuteronomy. Even if they’ve been using track one since Pentecost.

It’s a challenge, especially for me. Because I insist on reading the text through the lens of Jesus, how do I find anything “inspired” about these texts. Why would God want them included in the Bible when they’re so “divergent” from the image of the Father that Jesus presented to the world? Why?

First of all, it'll be helpful to be clear about which Jeroboam is meant in the text of Amos. It's Jeroboam II, not the first king of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam I.

Next, it's good to set all of this in context. The kingdom of Israel, the ten northern tribes that rebelled against Rehoboam (Solomon's son) and formed a new kingdom with Jeroboam I as their king, this kingdom has enjoyed enormous success economically and politically under Jeroboam II. Wealth and power and influence have grown as a result of military conquests.

But to understand this passage, it's also imperative to understand which plumb line Amos sees held up against the kingdom of Israel. It is true that the first Jeroboam set the people on the road of idolatry, and that this persists until the time of our current reading, but this isn't the corporate sin that tips the balance, that sets the wall so far off plumb that it will fall.

This sin is injustice. This is the thing that causes God to raise up a keeper of sheep in Judah to come and prophesy the fall of the kingdom and the house of Jeroboam.

Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth  
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;  
a man and his father go in to the same girl,  
so that my holy name is profaned;  
they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge,  
and in the house of their God they drink  
the wine of those who have been fined. (Amos 2:6-8, ESV)

The grinding down of the poor, the merciless oppression of the weak. This is what brings the fall of the Northern Kingdom, an end to the rule of the house of Jeroboam.

Now, I'm going to try to read all this through the lens of Jesus, because I believe that every word of Scripture is meant for our good, but I have to confess that even to me what I'm about to write sounds evasive.

What I have said before is that if it doesn't square with what we see in Jesus, then it isn't about God.

So what does square with Jesus in this passage? God's deep love for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the powerless.

What doesn't square? The sword. God wreaking vengeance on an entire population because He's angry at them.

How do I make all that fit?

Well, here's how I do it. Amos sees God's judgment of the injustice in the Northern Kingdom. He sees the plumb line, (used to make sure a wall was truly vertical and would not fall), he sees that the wall is so crooked it cannot stand, and he knows the reason. Injustice.

I believe he also sees the wrath of God. That's a difficult thing to preach because many too many preachers over the centuries have hurled that wrath at their listeners to instill fear, not hope. They have viewed God's wrath as Amos did, and were utterly incapable of understanding that God's wrath, real and terrible, is never directed at His children, but only at that which harms them.

So Amos sees this wrath and hears what fits with his inability to distinguish. The wrath covers not just the thing, the system, the nation-state that causes the harm, it covers all the people included in it.

And God intends to bring an end to that system, that nation-state, that pattern of unjust rule. And how does God do that? Refer back to the plumb line. What does a builder do when he or she finds they've built a wall that is not plumb? They tear it down before it can fall on someone.

And that is what God does. He tears them down. Not by the sword, but by the weight of their own wrongness. Yes, the nation fell to the sword of the Assyrians, but it was its rottenness that caused the fall. A nation that stood straight upon the love and the Justice of God would have seen the Assyrians withdraw from Israel as they did (miraculously) from Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah. (Isaiah 36-37)

God did not cause Assyria to invade Israel, but the nation wasn't strong enough to survive because it was consumed by its own injustice.

God was angry, yes, but His anger was as much about the fall of His people as their oppression of the needy. He told Amos what was going to happen, but Amos saw it without the lens of Jesus to interpret it, and so he put it in terms that he and the people around him understood. God would strike Israel in the same way that the gods of other nations struck them.

And God also tells Amos that the priest Amaziah's allegiance to the nation-state and not to God will lead him to his own downfall and that of his family. Not that God will cause it, but because he has hitched his wagon to an unjust system, and unjust rule, he and his family will suffer the consequences. (He could have repented.)

Can you think of a nation today whose success and pride have led them to a place of grinding injustice? Whose economic system is so rotten that it is at risk of collapsing of its own weight? Can you think of priests like Amaziah who say "Do not prophesy against this system!" and have aligned themselves with the system of injustice and not with the love and justice of God?

I can.

## Second Reading

A lot of scholars seem to think that Colossians wasn't written by Paul. I'm not certain. But as I was studying this text, I was caught by this one run on sentence. Paul is famous for run on sentences, so it makes me wonder if maybe he did have a hand in it. But this is where I'd like to focus this week:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:9–12, ESV)

Four verses, but all one sentence.

And the reason I was captured by this overlong sentence is that it reads one way when you first look at it, but studying it carefully it says something rather different.

Read simply, it seems to say that Paul and Timothy are praying that the Colossians (and we, I would add) would know what God's will is so that we can do it and in so doing, please Him and bear fruit.

But I don't think that's it at all. You aren't "filled" with that kind of knowledge, the knowledge of what to do in what moment and how. That's not the kind of knowledge that leads to "filling." If he'd meant that, Paul would have prayed that we might simply "know" God's will so that we might do it.

But this whole "filling" thing is something quite different. This is knowing the will of God in the bigger sense. The will to restore all things in His Son Jesus, to restore us to Himself, to make us new. And being filled with that knowledge? Having that awareness crowding out every fear, causing us to see the world and all our brothers and sisters as He sees them, then we walk as those worthy of the Lord. Because we know we are. And those who walk with that awareness, well, they are also filled by a desire to please Him, to "bear fruit," which is to see others walk in the same knowledge of who they are because of the surpassing love of Jesus.

I don't read the Bible to find rules for daily life. I read to find out who He is and who I am in Him. And when I am "filled" with that knowledge, the rest follows.

Gospel Text

This week's reading - The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It's difficult to find anything new to say about this parable. But I think I have something at least I haven't thought of before.

The lawyer has just given back to Jesus the Summary of the Law. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus has praised him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

Then the lawyer goes on to do a very strange thing. In order to “justify” himself, he asks, “And who is my neighbor.”

He’s trying to justify himself. In other words, he’s trying to make sure that the few he has managed to love are indeed the only ones he’s called on to love as he loves himself.

It reminds me of something I heard Chris Valloton say once. “When people come and ask me if they should tithe on their pre-tax or post-tax income I just remind them that their only reason to ask that question is to limit the amount you give.”

The only reason to ask the lawyer’s question is to limit the number of people who qualify as “neighbor.” That we have to ask at all is a judgment of sorts.

And so Jesus blows up his question by painting someone the lawyer would surely despise with the brush of “neighbor.” The point isn’t so much the answer as the question, and why he, or we, would ask it. The answer makes the question a judgment on itself.

What questions do we ask that are designed to put a limit on the love we’re called to extend?