

# When Religion Is Sick

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Text: Amos 5:14-15, 21-24

Community Christian Church

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Who do you take your cues from? Whose wisdom guides your daily living?

Do you have a favorite “hero” figure who inspires you toward a better life? Do you remember a cherished family member whose wit and insight still resonate inside your heart and soul and spur you on in your job, at school, with your family, among your friends?

Over the course of the next four Sundays, I hope you will come away from your worship experiences here at Community with some new “hero” figures, some newly claimed sources of inspiration. Beginning today and continuing through October 10, we’re going to be imbued with the beauty and sometimes blunt blessings of Biblical heroes. Your laughter will increase next Sunday because of Sarah. You’ll be either touched or puzzled or both when we see how sacred dogs are to God. And then we’ll examine what it means to choose life, day after day, step after step, breath after breath in our daily lives.

Today we begin with the unlikely hero and troubling figure of Amos. Amos’ words are not foreign to us. Even if we may not know much about the Bible, we have heard the resounding rhetorical flourishes of the 24<sup>th</sup> verse in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Amos: *“let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Now that would be fine as a bumper-sticker or as a motto to imprint daintily on a wall-hanging or as a nice reminder of soaring eloquence. But you must also know the rest of Amos and his prophecy, especially what he has to say about sick religion.

Amos was a Hebrew prophet who proclaimed the coming judgment of God in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Christ was born. From the southern Kingdom of Judah, in the little village of Tekoa, Amos, a humble shepherd, was tapped to speak a rough, harsh word of judgment to people luxuriating in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. This is certainly a recipe for unpopularity!

And, beyond the sterling examples of his beautiful ways with words, what does Amos proclaim? What does he “foretell/forthtell” to the people of Israel, and, by extension, to all who take heed of the prophet’s witness, i.e., us? *“The end is near.”*

No wonder the rulers and priests of his day considered Amos a rather stark, harsh and all together unpleasant fellow. "The end is near," he, a southerner, says to the folks in the Northern Kingdom. "The end is near," he proclaims to Amaziah, the court priest in charge of the sanctuary at Bethel. "The end is near" he also preaches to any contemporary person whose waywardness today would match the waywardness of the ancient Israelites who first received his preachment.

This is not merely Eeyore-like downcastness. Amos is not a "sad sack" figure moping around with a hang-dog countenance. No, Amos is attempting to address real and abiding problems which the people of his day are suffering without even knowing they're suffering them.

During the past summer, across the hot and humid stretch of the southern tier of the U.S., I had time and circumstance to do something I normally don't do: watch television programs that are purportedly religious. Most of these so-called religious programs were crammed with people of the Christian persuasion. And nearly all of the programs and nearly all of the featured hosts and guests of these programs were of a stripe that didn't represent the mainstream of the religion spectrum. One would rightly assess that the media battle had been won by fundamentalists.

To put it mildly, most of the programming was disturbing. In tone, content, and intention, the substance of what was broadcast in most of these shows was petty and pitifully pious, or, on the other hand, belligerent, mean, and self-righteously condemning. And rarely, if ever, was the ethic of love mentioned. Once, while driving along the Nantahala River – a tributary that courses through Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina – Amos' words came rushing back into my mind: "*For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel... I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies....*"

There were three noteworthy aspects of this television reality:

1. Many of the religious shows on television purvey *a prosperity gospel*, that is, to put bluntly, God wants you to be rich.
2. Many of the religious shows on television proclaim that *life here and now, on this earth, is of decidedly secondary importance.*
3. Almost all of the religious shows on television today are *lacking a call to justice.*

Amos' summary of all this would be... "Your religion is sick: Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos prophesied to a people that was experiencing the pinnacle of power. To Israel's dominating clutch of control, he offered a fiery rebuke: "The end is near! *Your*

end is near!" Not only did it insult the rulers and leaders of Israel, it didn't make much sense, given their apparent prosperity, security, and vast possessions. Insulting, insane, and absolutely irritating – such was Amos' reputation.

I'm not sure what Amos would look like if he appeared among us or what he would actually sound like if he prophesied to our circumstance.

We have no way of really knowing what he in fact looked like 2800 years ago. We can infer with some degree of accuracy that he probably looked like a shepherd, for he describes himself as a "herdsman and a tender of sycamore trees."

What we do know are Amos' words, and from his words I believe, we have good guidance about the dangers of sick religion, not only in his time but in our own as well.

Guided by Amos, there are 2 old sicknesses for which we need to be watchful and 2 new ones.

First, *the disconnect between the worship which people rendered to God and their indifference to justice for hurting people* was the #1 infraction Amos was protesting. Not only in Amos' proclamations, but in the prophetic proclamations of Amos' contemporaries (Isaiah, Hosea, Jonah), the call to justice was of premier importance. Amos put it plainly: "... establish justice in the gate." Ostentatious worship, saying all the right words and doing all the correct sacerdotal gestures, could not make up for Israel's indifference to justice. Indifference toward the poor. Indifference toward orphans. Indifference to those without power. Amos would resonate with the wise counsel of Elie Wiesel: "The opposite of love is not hate but indifference."

If Amos were here today, we would not be surprised to hear him decry the indifference to justice that too long prevailed in the Kansas City School District over the past 2 generations of students. I think he would be greatly appreciative of the efforts by Dr. Covington, spurred on by a rising tide of concerned citizen groups, including many Community members.

The second cultural, political and religious infraction Amos protested was Israel's basic *refusal of faith*. That is, Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom, had both lapsed into a denial of God's power of provision. The most obvious representation of this denial was rapacious greed. Grasping after material possessions they sought to satisfy a ravenous hole in their lives that only God could fill.

I think Amos would be aghast and dismayed by the prevalence of the prosperity gospel in our midst. Surely he would call us to resist such a perversion of Jesus' message of love and his redeeming witness of compassion.

But two new contemporary sicknesses also presently harm us. They are akin to what Amos witnessed in ancient Israel but they are certainly modern in their impact and influence.

The first is *privatized self-righteous condemning of others*. From Terry Jones to equally bigoted fundamentalistic terrorists, from the bully on the playground to bullies on the radio, from television programs and print media, self-righteous condemning of others seems to be running rampant.

The second malady that seems to be plaguing religion more and more these days is *a lack of a vivid sense of God's presence*. There seems to be a withering of our claims of being touched by God. Now, I know, that many if not most of us are naturally reluctant to speak openly about how God "touched us here" or how God "visited us there." I know that reluctance myself. But it seems that there is something more going on, a more pervasive malaise regarding God being really present in our lives. I've heard friends say "I don't sense God being real much these days. God doesn't seem to be here." And this sickness of religion is part of all kinds of faith, fundamentalistic and liberal and every sort in between.

Now, I'm going to move away from Amos, since Amos had no obvious program for change. Now that we have the diagnosis, what about the remedies? I'm glad you asked that question. I have four simple suggestions which, I earnestly believe, can help us (and any anyone else) when religion is sick:

1. ***Do justice.*** Amos was like unto Micah, another of Amos' contemporaries, who charged his hearers: "Do justice." (Micah 6:8) Remember Amos' clarion cry "Seek good, and not evil!" (Amos 5:14). Participate in some activity, some endeavor, some event that will provide care, comfort, and compassion for "the least of these" in our culture. Join a group, dig in and do a service project, sign a petition, become a member of an organization. Whatever your choices may be, remember that it is action and not merely attitude that fulfills the call to justice.
2. ***Don't count on money to save you.*** Release your dreams of amassing piles of wealth to secure your future. The prosperity gospel promulgated by television preachers will sadly disappoint you. It is full of neither prosperity nor gospel. Let us never forget that Jesus pronounced a supreme blessing on those without prosperity: "Blessed are the poor."

3. *Tell the truth*, and only tell it as well as you know it and never with self-righteous condemnation. I have a suggestion that I'd like to hatch this morning: let us conspire to spread unadorned truthfulness wherever we go. How about it? What do you think? Want to try that?

Last week my friend Dr. Jan Linn spoke a powerful word from Community's pulpit as part of a 9/11 service called "From Pain to Peace." Jan is working on a new book with the provisional title of *Are Christians as Bad as Everyone Thinks?* I find his thinking provocative and winning, as he tries to disentangle Christian belief and dominant public perceptions of it. One statement he made I will never forget: "*We can tell all the truth we know without claiming to know all the truth there is.*" In other words, truthfulness is like a gemstone: we can only know the facets of it we can see. Jan is right in his statement, and this could serve as a motto for our truthfulness conspiracy: "*Let us tell all the truth we know without claiming to know all the truth there is.*"

4. *Practice the presence of God.* Shall we begin acting out our Christian commitments and our deepest beliefs with vitality? Shall we engage in regular worship and daily prayer with the foundational assumptions that God is present in our lives and in the lives of all people? Shall we wake up each morning with a positive refrain on our lips – with an "Aha!" instead of "Alas and alack?" Instead of saying "Good Lord, it's morning...", shall we instead proclaim "Good morning, Lord!"?

I close with this true story. Back in the spring, I was privileged to officiate at the wedding of Deidre Kalman and Wade Walker on a bright Saturday morning at Somerset Vineyard. An unanticipated gift graced the day, including the entire crowd celebrating Deidre's and Wade's union, and along with Deidre and Wade themselves. In the beauty of the bucolic setting, the wedding party proceeded down the hillside aisle to the place of the ceremony by the lake. Everyone was beautiful – attendants, mothers, flower girl, friends. And of course the bride and groom. And then I spoke the words I came to say, "Dearly Beloved we are gathered together in the presence of God and in the face of this company to witness and to bless the joining of this woman and this man in holy matrimony."

Very quickly I came to the conclusion of the opening welcome, "So Deidre and Wade are here, and we are, for we would be no place else on the face of the earth. And Another is here, God is here..." And before I could get out the rest of the phrase ("... to witness and to bless and to make yet holier still this marriage..."), little Christina Johnson, the petite 3-year-old flower girl, blurted out "God is here, Mama! God is here!"

Talking with Christina's mother after the ceremony, while also telling Christina my thanks for the best 6-word sermon I had heard in a long time, I found out that Christina's father died before she was born, killed in action in Iraq. And yet, despite that gaping hole in her life, despite that existential deficit, she and her mother spoke to God every night in their prayers, and she practiced, daily, the presence of God.

"God is here, Mama! God is here!" Can we begin to say that on a regular, disciplined basis, in honor of Amos and his challenging prophecy? If we will, we will begin to see a healing in our lives, a healing in our land, a healing in religions of all kinds and sorts, including our own. *God* is here! God *is* here! God is *here*! Amen.