

Simple But Not Easy

Amos 5

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on October 10, 2021

This week a former Facebook employee turned whistleblower sounded the alarm of the company's moral bankruptcy before Congress. We learned that Facebook executives routinely and regularly ignored the findings of its own formidable research department, research that proved a variety of ways in which Facebook's algorithms across its various platforms was making the world worse—from boosting your Uncle's conspiracy theories about the election, spreading misinformation about the coronavirus or its scientifically proven-to-be safe vaccines, to perhaps most troubling of all, actively preying on the insecurity of adolescent girls on Instagram by pushing them toward pro-anorexia accounts if they expressed even a faint interest in something as innocent as a healthy diet. Why did they ignore this research, you ask? Because making changes to the algorithm to make the world better would make them less money. Can you believe that?

Of course you can believe it. This is the least surprising news story I have ever read. Let me rewrite the headline for you. The New York Times headline was: “Whistleblower says Facebook Chooses Profits over Safety.” How's this instead: “Publicly Traded Company Whose Primary Mission Is To Increase Value For Its Shareholders Chooses To Increase Value For Its Shareholders.” Or this, “Richest People In the World Choose To Keep Being Rich, Thank You Very Much.” Or, let me give it one more try: “When Given The Choice, People Will Choose Money For Themselves Over the Common Good Almost Every Time.”

This is not a new human phenomenon. It is actually one of oldest human phenomena there is. It is at least as old as the prophet Amos, whose words we heard read a few minutes ago. Amos was a poet-farmer-prophet. A Wendell Berry of ancient Judah, sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the height of its power and material wealth. Jeroboam II was something like the Mark Zuckerberg of ancient Israel. As king he had just recently beat back the kingdom of Syria and the kingdom of Israel was flourishing, experiencing economic growth and material wealth like they have never seen before. Technological breakthroughs were everywhere. In this case, we read about luxurious banqueting couches, about beds inlaid with ivory, about entire houses hewn out from stone. The problem, of course, is that this wealth is not equally distributed, that the benefit for some comes at the cost for others. The poor are being ignored, beaten, cheated, manipulated, disrespected, and killed. And Amos simply will not stand for it.

In memorably poetic phrase after phrase, Amos denounces the powerful; those who “oppress the poor and crush the vulnerable.” In our reading, Amos warns that God will set fire to those who cast righteousness to one side without a care; to those who take justice, something holy and sweet, and turn it into something that tastes bitter like wormwood. Amos warns that those who steal grain from the poor, those who push aside the needy at the city gate, those who afflict the righteous, those who trample the already downtrodden, that they will be punished; that they will never get to live in the glorious houses they are building; that they will never be able to drink the wine from the vineyards they just planted. That though outwardly they appear to be a flourishing kingdom that will last forever, that they are actually a house built on sand, and that soon enough, they will be conquered and scattered again.

Here we are, thousands upon thousands of years later, on the opposite side of the globe, with different sounding names speaking different languages where everything but everything Amos was talking about is, in fact, exactly the same. The disparity between the rich and the poor is only worse. What are we supposed to do? What would Amos have us do?

The answer depends on where we see ourselves on the spectrum of those to whom Amos's prophetic poetry is aimed. It's pretty straightforward if you are on either extreme. If you are rich and powerful, you just need to wait for God's inevitable punishment. If you are poor and vulnerable, you can just wait for God to deliver you. The trouble is most of us, I suspect, wouldn't align with either the Zuckerbergs or those on the margins. We see ourselves—I certainly see myself—somewhere in the vast and murky middle. And prophets have a way of making the middle ground disappear right under your feet. This is what Jesus does to the rich young ruler. And it's what Amos does to you and me. You're either with God or against God, and for Amos that is evidenced principally by whether you are with the poor or against the poor.

Of course, helping the poor can be complicated. Much has been studied and much has been written about how best to help the poor. It's something we think about a lot as a Church, through our relationships with our partner organizations like El Buen Samaritano, Trinity Center, the African American Youth Harvest Foundation, Community First Village. And it's not always as straightforward as one might think. There are legacies of colonialism to consider. There are overly paternalistic and transactional models of aid. Like I said, these things are complicated.

But the thing is, I think it's worth pointing out that for Amos, it's not actually that complicated. Did you notice the advice that Amos gives? Amos's advice is simple, unambiguous, and direct. It boils down to just a few phrases found in our reading today. *Seek the Lord and live. Seek good and not evil, that you may live. Hate evil and love good.* It doesn't get more straightforward than that. Seek the Lord. Hate Evil. Love Good. Seek God. Seek Good. Not evil.

It's not that Amos or God don't care about all the nuance and journal articles about how best to help those who need help. The world is an infinitely complex place and God is interested in every layer of complexity, because he created every layer in the first place. But it's also the case that for Amos, that stuff belongs in different sermon or seminar. Amos isn't talking to the very few who are already helping the poor and vulnerable and trying to help them see how best to do so. Amos is speaking to the indifferent masses who are ignoring the problems to begin with. And that's a good enough place to start, as far as he is concerned. Seek the Lord. Hate evil. Love Good. Seek Good. This is not a complicated sermon.

Sometimes just that is good enough. Sometimes that's all you need to remember to make the right decision. Are you in the murky middle ground and want a way out? Well what would it look like for you to seek good and not evil?

If only I could get those words painted on the ceiling of Mark Zuckerberg's bedroom. If only we could each get those words tattooed on the inside of our eyelids. It's not complicated advice. But that's just the thing, it isn't—it's also not easy to follow. And maybe we're slow to get up in arms about Facebook's struggle to follow the

advice because we know we are pretty slow to follow it ourselves. We know that we are not so unlike Mark Zuckerberg. We know that we are amongst those who would probably choose money for ourselves over the common good 9 times out of 10 if given the choice. And we know, what the writer of Hebrews says to be true: [that our God] *is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. . . . that [the] word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.*

In this sermon, I am simply saying that these two things can be true at once. The first is this: The God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ consistently and unambiguously sides with the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable over against everybody and everything else. To be a follower of this God means locating ourselves, with our actions, on their side too. Seeking the Lord, doing good, and hating evil very often means taking action for the good of others. It's as simple as that.

The second thing is this: We struggle to seek the Lord, to do good, and to hate evil in our own lives every day. We are hard wired to choose ourselves over others. To choose money and security over justice and equality. Which is why it is a good thing that *we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession*—that we can continue to seek good and not evil no matter how much we fail at it—*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

All of this comes together in the words of our collect today, so I will simply end by reading it for us again. Please pray with me: *Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen*

Amen.