

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2016

"THE MEASURE OF MORALITY"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Amos 8:1-12 ~ Luke 10:38-42

I went to Chicago Theological Seminary, and at that time it was located smack dab in the middle of the University of Chicago. The campus is right out of a movie set ... ivy covered walls and brilliant students with bright futures playing Frisbee on the large expanses of grass ... well, not so much in the winter but that's a story for another time. On a gorgeous fall or spring day you couldn't find more pleasant surroundings ... until you ventured a few blocks farther South. There you encountered an entirely different picture ... abject poverty, violent confrontations, and a sense of hopelessness that often accompanies both. But our worlds collided many mornings when I would walk out of my dormitory with my fellow classmates to find the same fellow sitting on the front steps. "Mornin', Reverends!" he would say to us, apparently more convinced of our future than we were. "Could you spare some change to help a fellow in need?" Some of us would scramble to our purses and some of us would just scam. But invariably someone would loudly say that any money he was given was likely to be spent on drugs or booze. I have learned at least to be kind ... to look a fellow human being in the eye and give a caring answer. So one day when I didn't have anything to give I said, "No I'm sorry I can't help you today, but I hope you have a good day." And his response brought me up short, "Reverend, you have to help me!" he said. "God says you have to help the poor, and I'm as poor as they come!"

He got me to thinking ... what is it with God and the poor? I mean, he was right. God does say we have to help them. We may prefer to quote with resignation the one verse of scripture that says, "*The poor you always have with you*" (Matt 26:4), but the overwhelming testimony of the scripture ... from the Torah to the Apocalypse ... is that God holds us accountable to care for them. God loves everybody, of course, from the fabulously well to do to the least of these. But God loves the least of these the most.

You hear a lot these days about the moral decline of our nation. Just ask a fundamentalist preacher and he (not she!) will tell you, "The United States is an immoral nation on the road to hell." Ask him why he thinks so, and he is likely to point to sexual immorality in high places and in our movies and television and music and dress, maybe the general decline of church attendance. Catch a more progressive preacher, he (or she!) might bemoan the rampant materialism in our culture or the increasing violence in our entertainment ... echoed in our streets and schools. But conservative or liberal, most people who complain about the moral decline in our nation think only of *personal* morality. Even those who don't want to talk about morality at all will complain that it is a personal matter and therefore private. Well, hear the word of the Lord today ... morality is not just a personal or private matter.

Don't get me wrong. Personal morality matters. Privacy matters, too. But I have noticed that the specifics in the code of personal morality shift from age to age and community to community. The most conservative Christian believers in the United States look at a Moslem

woman clothed from head to toe in the summer heat and think, "What a weird religion!" They don't realize that earlier generations of Christians would be scandalized to see how *they* dress today! Oh, the basic principles of personal morality never change ... honesty, mutuality, self-discipline, humility, compassion, kindness, fidelity, fairness, and the like. But the do's and don'ts of how these principles are expressed change a lot from place to place and time to time. A church that would have asked you to resign as a deacon for playing cards twenty years ago holds casino nights for outreach today. No wonder people get confused.

We are so individualistic in our mindset, almost no one in our country thinks in terms of social morality, or cultural morality ... the way the nation's morality might be measured as a nation rather than as the sum total of individual persons. But that's just how the biblical prophets measure morality, in terms of the social contract and the systems which govern our lives together.

Take Amos as an example. Last week I told you how hard it was for him to get a hearing for the word of the Lord because he was telling the King, the priests, the wealthy elite, and the people what they did not want to hear. Well, this is what he was telling them ... "God is angry with you because of the way you have treated the poor. God demands righteousness and justice, meaning faith in God (not in your idols of wealth and violence) and provision for all persons (not just the powerful and elite)." According to the prophets, God measures the morality of a nation by the way it takes care of the *least* powerful in their midst.

In Amos' day, the economy was good for those who had wealth and power. Their army was strong, the nations around them weak. They were quite religious, faithful in attending worship, offering sacrifices. They told themselves that God had blessed them. They told themselves that their wealth was a reward for their hard work. They were self-satisfied and self-congratulatory. And then this migrant farm worker turned preacher did what Adolf Adler called "spitting in the client's soup." Amos told them God was sending disaster to their nation, and why?

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."
The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds (Amos 8:4-7).

We might decide Amos was a fanatic ... a lone voice in a sea of complacency ... a simpleton who just didn't understand the complexities of economics. Most economists will tell you ... you have to have a poor working class to create wealth ... you have to have a certain amount of underemployment to keep the economy strong. The crimes that Amos decries ... manipulating currency, pricing to maximize profit, selling everything you can, working seven days a week, using your money to get the best legal deals you can ... are just good business practice. The people who do these things today are the heroes of Wall Street! But Amos holds everybody responsible ... business, government, law, and religion ... for the effects these practices have on the poor. And Amos is merely one biblical voice among many, including Moses, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul, James, and Jesus, to mention a few ... who insist God holds *nations* accountable for the way they treat the poor.

Which brings me to my original question ... what is it with God and the poor? Just what's so special about poverty? I don't think that the Bible romanticizes the poor, as if they are somehow morally superior to the rest of us. In my experience, some are and some are not. But if you get involved in helping the poor, you will not be romantic about it for long. The poor are a broad group of people with a great variety of problems and few resources to meet them ... lack of education and basic skills, malnutrition, inadequate health care, homelessness, mental illness, and so on. There is no one simple, easy solution for poverty. But while the Bible calls us to care for the poor, it does not want to say being poor is a good thing.

No, it seems to me that God's love for the poor is a reflection of God's love for all persons and God's call *to us* to love all persons. We are all welfare recipients. God has given us a good earth that we did nothing to deserve. Even the hardest worker among us is indebted to parents and teachers and laborers and countless others for the opportunity to succeed. Not a single one of us has earned his or her wealth without the grace of someone else's sacrifice. Even with the explosion of human population in the world, there are more than enough resources to feed and clothe and house all human beings adequately. The problem is human selfishness, human politics, human greed. But God has provided these resources with the desire that no one be left out. It is a matter of Divine justice.

And I think God calls us to care for the poor because we need the encounter. In caring for the poor, we discover our own spiritual poverty, our selfishness, our materialism, our propensity to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. So in caring for the poor, we can confront and overcome our own spiritual inadequacies. I mean, if some have more than they need while others do not have enough, who is spiritually lacking in this picture? Who lacks the gratitude and compassion and love of God to share the goodness of God's blessings? God loves the poor because if God doesn't love them, who will?

So how does our state measure up morally by God's standard of measurement? Doug Malinsky and I attended a breakout session on childhood poverty at our Conference Annual meeting last month after hearing Rev. Scott Anderson, Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, state the following stunning statistic to the larger assembly. "Wisconsin ranks *last* among the 50 states in the well-being of African American children." *Dead last* ... the states Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia do a better job than we do. The total number of Wisconsin children, of all races, living in poverty is 235,000 ... that's 18% of all children. But here's the good news, the Wisconsin Council of Churches has joined with three other organizations to hold our state legislature and public servants and policy makers accountable. A resolution is being crafted that would adopt a goal of cutting child poverty in half in ten years. They chose child poverty for three reasons: because children are the poorest segment of our population, because virtually no one would claim that children are responsible for their own poverty, and because any effective policies will have to help the parents as well (a so-called two generation strategy.) They realize that these goals are ambitious, and that there are factors that are beyond their influence at the state level. But they also know that the long-term, negative consequences of the high child poverty level and the racial and ethnic disparities in our state harms all of us, and particularly our children. With that said, they feel the need to hold all components of Wisconsin society collectively responsible for achieving these goals because it is the moral, just and economically sound action to take.

Certainly the church cannot do it all, but we must do our part. We must hear God's call to help where we can, in the name of Christ, to feed the hungry and house the homeless and heal the sick. And the church is also responsible to be a prophetic voice to the whole society. It is not just the church's job to care for the poor. We must call the whole nation to compassion and social justice. We must challenge those systems which keep people poor or shut whole groups out from equal access to resources. We must demand that our politicians make public policy regarding the poor a matter of top priority. If the Bible is true, it is a matter of national security before God. Government must do its part, and our responsibility is to call government at every level to be involved in addressing poverty with intentional policy. Business must do its part, and our responsibility is to speak truth to the economic powers to demand that they share the wealth with the people who created the wealth for them. Every sector of our society, every institution in our land, every public leader should share in caring for all of our people so that no one gets left out of the goodness that some of us have received. And when our nation is moving to ignore or silence those in need, the role of the church is to be a voice for those who have no voice, an empowerment for those who have no power, a home for those who have no hope.

I know it's not a popular subject. I would much rather preach on our gospel text today ... the lovely story about Mary and Martha which encourages us to sit at the feet of Jesus and let the world worry about itself. But you can't sit at the feet of Jesus very long without hearing the voice of Amos and of Isaiah and Hosea and Jeremiah with God's unequivocal demand upon us to care for the poor. I wonder what Amos would say to us today if he strolled through some of the neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. where poverty has left its mark and then saw the imperial symbols of wealth and power over at the Capitol? Do you think they would invite him to address a joint session or have an audience with the President? How many of our churches would welcome what he has to say? Seems to me the last and greatest division for us to challenge before we can truly claim to be an inclusive church and a good nation is the great wall of economic class. Maybe we've done better than a lot of other nations, but we aren't there yet. And for God's sake, let's not lose the ground we've gained. God, show us the way. Amen.

May we pray?

God, we are a most creative people when it comes to using technology for defense. And we have our best brains developing public policy to encourage the economy. But we lack the creativity, the energy, the compassion to make caring for the poor our first priority. Thank you for what we have been able to do; help us not to rest until the task is complete. Thank you for what the poor teach us about ourselves; give us the wisdom to keep learning. Thank you for the opportunities you give us to care for the least of these; give us the voice to call others to the task. And, as your prophets in this world, give your church the compassion to keep caring, the love to keep inviting, and the courage to keep demanding from our nation the morality you require, in Jesus' name. Amen.