

Sermon 7-12-2015 "Tough Stuff" Mark 6:14-29 Amos 7:7-15

We just heard the story of how John the Baptist was killed by King Herod. First he was imprisoned because he had stood up and denounced Herod's marriage to his brother Philip's wife. Then, at a birthday banquet, Herod's wife conspired to get rid of John by having their daughter ask for John the Baptist's head to be served on a platter.

John could have played it smart and kept silent about what he saw as wrong in God's eyes. But he didn't. In fact, this same John who was born to elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah six months before Jesus was born always seemed eager to take the tough route. He lived in the wilderness, ate locusts and honey, and was forever challenging people to repent of their sins and be baptized. He never shied away from tough stuff, and it got him killed.

Another person who was called to go against the grain and challenge leaders was Amos. Amos was a shepherd and tree farmer about seven hundred years before Jesus was born. God interrupted his life, though, and told him to give God's message to the people of Israel. He lived in a challenging time, when those in power in his country were making all the wrong kinds of decisions, looking out for their OWN comforts instead of caring for the poor and powerless. Amos used the image of the plumb line, God's Word, God's Law, to show them just how far out of kilter they had become.

Just to get a taste of the gist of Amos' preaching to the people of Israel, here are a couple of verses from the fourth chapter of Amos: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy... The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: the time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks..."

In today's lesson, the priest, Amaziah, told King Jeroboam that Amos was criticizing Israel and conspiring against the king, then the priest derided Amos, telling him to leave, to go to the southern kingdom, Judah, and earn his money there as a prophet. Amos bristled, telling the priest that he was NOT a professional prophet and did not come from a line of prophets. Then he bluntly spoke God's word against the priest and against the nation Israel: "You say that I should not prophesy against Israel. Because of this, God says that your wife will be forced into prostitution in the city; your sons and daughters shall be killed by the sword; you will lose everything and die in an unclean land, and Israel shall be forced into exile."

A tough, bad-news message. Not long after, in the year 721 BCE, the super-power-of-the-day Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, Israel, just as Amos had foretold.

John the Baptist and Amos were *bold!!* They had a clear understanding in their hearts as to what God wanted them to do and say, and they followed through when they were ridiculed or threatened, even to the point of death.

Over the last few weeks, some of us have been learning a bit about the beliefs of people of other faiths. Muslims show their belief in God by praying five times every day, by giving 2 ½ percent of their income to the poor every year, by fasting from sunrise to sunset every day for a month during Ramadan, and by making the trip to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Conservative and orthodox Jews take their Sabbath and dietary laws very seriously and the men wear yarmulkes on their heads. It's not hard to recognize an orthodox Jew.

What about us? I was choosing hymns for later bulletins and chose for one week the song, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." But will they, DO they? What is it that sets us apart and lets someone know that we are trying to follow Jesus? There's an old question that still seems pertinent for us today: "If you were arrested and dragged to court, would there be any PROOF to convict you of being a Christian?" (Source uncertain) I might be able to find my ordination papers and my paychecks; you may have a church membership certificate or a baptismal paper; but is there *proof* that we are followers of Jesus Christ?

A few images of followers come to mind. One, the Black pastors who have been organizing marches in Hartford to protest all the shootings and violence, boldly speaking out and putting themselves on the line. They are working to make people safer.

Two, the family members and church family of the nine shooting victims in Charleston, SC, who have continued to offer grace in the face of their tremendous losses. And three, Pope Francis, as he exudes a quiet, powerful and yet joyful peace and openness to people while at the same time being very firm in his convictions that the status quo at the Vatican must be challenged and cleaned up. He seeks justice for the powerless in this world. Tough stuff.

The other day I was talking with someone about how children are being raised these days, bemoaning the fact that too often parents seem to settle for a path of least resistance. Entertain those kids, put them in front of a video, don't hassle them if they neglect their chores or break a few rules. The truth is, being a good parent is hard; it requires saying NO, it means sometimes the child will not like you. To raise a child well a parent must be consistent and follow through on what you've said. Hard, tough work. But the rewards can be amazing!!

Being a Christian is not so different. Each of us has somewhere along the line promised our Lord that we will follow him and let him be our first priority. Love God, love our neighbors; it sounds easy, but it's not. It's tough. Even if you probably won't get arrested or killed for being a Christian in this country, it can still be really hard.

One example: You try to do something nice for someone, maybe give them some grocery gift cards, but then you are told that the person sells the cards for drug money. Or you think you're doing something really fine by getting together a few things to help a family out with groceries, and what happens? It turns out the family has all the extra cable channels you could never afford, and the mother smokes cigarettes all the time (do the math on that!), and then you find

out that they are going to Disney World in August. It can feel as though you've been kicked in the gut, when you think you're doing something good but find out you're really not helping anybody who is in great need. Such an experience can really jaundice one's willingness to reach out again. I have heard Christians struggle with things like this all through my years of ministry. Trying to help people can be disheartening.

But wait. Did people do well by what Jesus offered in his day? Did he receive certificates of appreciation for his service above-and-beyond? How about when he healed ten lepers and only one bothered to say thank you? And remember how his home-town synagogue members liked him at first, but when he started challenging them, they tried to throw him over a cliff? Not to mention the priests of Jesus' day who were finally successful in getting him killed. His own disciples couldn't even stand by him. Coming to earth to save people was certainly no piece for cake. It was disheartening and deadly. And today, as most of us tend to be rather lackadaisical in our walk as Christians, it must continue to be tough for God.

Here's a story. It actually refers to the story of the Good Samaritan, but I think it fits here as well. In Robert Fulghum's book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Villard Books, 1989, pp. 153-155), he recounts the story of V. P. Menon, one of the significant political figures in India during that nation's struggle for independence from Britain. Unlike most of the leaders in the Independence movement, Menon was a self-made man. He was the oldest of twelve children, had quit school at thirteen and worked as a laborer, a coal miner, factory hand, merchant, and school teacher. He talked his way into a job as a clerk in the Indian administration that began a meteoric rise -- largely because of his integrity and brilliant skills in working with both Indian and British officials in a productive way.

In addition to his reputation as an efficient administrator, Menon was widely known for his personal charity. After he died, his daughter explained that when her father "arrived in Delhi to seek a job in government, all his possessions (including his money and ID) were stolen at the railroad station. It looked as though he would have to return home on foot, defeated. In desperation he turned to an elderly Sikh, explained his troubles, and asked for a temporary loan of fifteen rupees to tide him over until he could get a job. The Sikh gave him the money. When Menon asked for his address so that he could repay the man, the Sikh said that Menon owed the debt to any stranger who came to him in need, as long as he lived. The help came from a stranger and had to be repaid to a stranger.

"Menon never forgot that debt: neither the gift of trust nor the fifteen rupees. His daughter said that the day before Menon died, a beggar came to the family home in Bangalore asking for help to buy new sandals, for his feet were covered with sores. Menon asked his daughter to take fifteen rupees out of his wallet to give to the man. It was Menon's last conscious act."

Fulghum continues, "On several occasions when I have thought about the story of the Good Samaritan, I have wondered about the rest of the story. What effect did the charity have on the man who was robbed and beaten and taken care of? Did he remember the cruelty of the robbers and shape his life with that memory? Or did he remember the nameless generosity of the

Samaritan and shape his life with that debt? What did he pass on to the strangers in his life, those in need he met?"

Christians of 2015, we have been given a plumb-line by which to measure our own living, Jesus Christ. He has forgiven us our debts - our sins - and asked us to follow him by sharing mercy, forgiveness and kindness with other people. He calls us to a life that involves a lot more than just having "the right answers." He would have us risk reaching out to people because we are walking the path of love our Lord walked.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

It would be so simple, if we could just learn the Ten Commandments and memorize all the right answers and take a test and know that we passed into eternal life. But God has not designed things that way. God has given us the stories of the struggles of human beings trying to love God and to love others and usually failing miserably. God has given us Jesus, against whose life our own lives may be measured. God has asked us to love God and other people (that's the really tough stuff!)...and then God has lifted us out of our own failures and provided the care we need until we can get up and try again. Mercy. Hope. Forgiveness. Life.

Jesus Christ came to let us see what these words mean when it comes to walking-around life in this world. By the grace and mercy of our Lord, may we be led through all the tough stuff of our lives – our dealings with family, work, neighbors, and this world – into eternal life. Amen.