

A Sermon By
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The On Going Re-forming of the Church
Amos 5:21-24 (and 4:7-11)

The words of the prophet Amos have appeared in our suggested scripture readings several times in the last few weeks. In reading them I have been reminded of what powerful words they are. The reading for this week was from Amos 8. The People of the Northern Kingdom of Israel gave lip service to God, so God says through his prophet:

Hear this, you who trample the needy
And do away with the poor of the land.
Saying, "When will the New Moon be over
So we can sell grain,
And the Sabbath be ended
So we can market our wheat?"
Skimping the measure, boosting the price
And cheating with dishonest scales.

Amos 8:4-5

The readings reminded me of how significant Amos is, so on the three days we don't have a suggest reading, I turned again to this book and simply read the book. Amos 5 (that we heard read just a few minutes ago):

This is what the LORD says, "I hate your religious festivals
[your Easter celebrations with bunnies galore,
July 4th and Memorials Days with their themes of Empire Building;
Your Christmas Celebration that focus on yourselves instead of the One who is to come]
I can not stand them.
When you bring me offering to placate me, I will not accept it.
Stop your noisy repetitious songs,
I do not want to listen to your harps [or guitars or basses].
Instead, let justice flow like a stream and righteousness like a river that never goes dry!

Amos 5:21-24 TEV/me

Powerful words then. Powerful words now.

For many of us they are part of an overall Biblical call for reform in the Church. We are not what we should be. We know that. Amos reminds us of that. Many contemporary Christian authors say it too.

I was reading a book review recently. It was of a new book by Brian McLaren. The McLaren is a major contemporary writer on the subject of reforming the church. The reviewer, a supporter of McLaren's point of view, made this comment:

...the tendency in mainline or progressive circles has long been to say that the problem is outdated, outmoded Christianity. The project has been to redo

theology, revise language and creed, update imagery, and practice, all with the idea that if we can just make Christianity fit into our present world, all will be well. In a fair number of churches this revisionist project has gone on for so long that there simply isn't much left to revise...

(Anthony Robinson, *Christian Century*, April 20, 2010, p. 38)

The comment made me stop and ask myself, "Jim, what do you think about all this? What do you think about the current calls for reform?" And I began making notes in my journal:

- The Church is constantly re-forming. Church is not static. We hear the criticisms, we raise them ourselves, we look for new or better ways of doing things. We do it slowly and that is frustrating to some. But don't miss the face that the church is constantly re-forming.
- In fact, the church was changing right before my eyes as I graduated from seminary. The old form of worship based on Isaiah's encounter with God
 - Praise
 - Confession
 - Absolution (forgiveness)
 - Call to service
 - Sending out *to serve*Was being replaced by a new form
 - Praise
 - Prayer
 - Word
 - Offering/dedication
 - Sending out to live as much as serve.
- The music was changing. It was more positive, upbeat and God oriented.
- The church was fracturing, splitting into newer forms with a wider variety of style that met the increasingly complex and diverse culture we are part of [repeat this one because it is a long, involved sentence].
- One reform that I like is we allow scripture to "speak for itself." In the old days we would read a passage like this one from Amos 5 that I read a few minutes ago and the preacher would harangue us about not caring for the poor. But today we assume the congregation heard what Amos was saying. And we will take it to heart. I like that.
- Some of the ideas for change that we've had over the years seemed relevant, but were not practical. I am thinking of the Home Church movement. We thought we didn't need buildings or institutions—just meet in small groups for study, prayer and service. What we didn't take into account is the fact that sometimes we want and need neutral places to meet, talk and serve. Places like this one.
 - Ah, but the small group movement didn't go away. If you look at the really big churches you'll find that they are made up of lots of small groups where people meet for prayer, study and getting to know each other.
- Speaking of institution and reform: over the years I have learned that institutions serve people and not the other way around. I don't spend a whole lot of energy worrying about reforming the institution. Instead it seems to me if we do our best

to love and serve others, the institutions will slowly come around without you are me having to prod them.

- Some reform sounds good and seems to work—for a while. I am thinking a style of church growth I've heard speakers talk about. The UMC pastor is sent to a struggling church. He (and it is usually a *he*) exerts strong leadership and builds it up. It becomes so strong he/it forms satellite churches and hires staff to lead those churches. This is all going fine and then *the system* says,

“It is time for you to move.”

But I can't move. I have built this wonderful church.

Ah, but the United Methodist Church has itinerating pastors. You were never guaranteed a place *to stay*...

And the wonderful church begins to unravel because it was built on a personal style—and that does not work in the United Methodist Church.

Now some of you would say, “Then it should change.” That is an appropriate response. But so is, “This is the way *we* are. There are plenty of options in life and in how churches are organized and you are welcome to leave us and form (reform) the church the way you think it should be.” Both are reasonable options.

- And that leads me to one last observation about reform. As I say I think the church I've been a part of for 39 years is constantly forming and re-forming. But I encounter people periodically who don't see it that way. They think we are out of step (which we often are) and need to do x, y & z to do it right. But the thing I've noticed is more often than not they want to tell us what we should be doing. What I've learned to reply is:

Of your proposal, which part are you willing to do?

I am inviting them to participate in the continuing re-forming of the church.

Amos, your words are as relevant today as they were 2300 years ago. We need to be concerned with justice and right living, with our commitments and service to the living God. On behalf of God you called for reform then. God, keep calling/keep leading us in re-form today. Amen.