

Making a prophet

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2009.

Then the Lord said, "See I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people. . . Amos 7:8

Amos was an unlikely prophet. He was sheep-farmer with no status in the community and no particular qualifications for the job. He left the relative peace and prosperity of his village of Tekoa in the Judean hills just six miles south of Bethlehem to respond to the call to be a spokesman for God. While he may have seemed an unlikely sort to be a prophet, Amos was not naive. He saw the loosening of moral standards in the age of prosperity and peace. He deplored the exploitation of the poor and corruption in public life. The lifestyle of the ruling class oppressed the common people who were powerless. At the heart of it all they practiced the rituals of religion with no inner conviction. Their religious observances were empty of any belief in what they were doing. In short, they were religious without being spiritual.

It was in that context that God called Amos to preach against the excesses, the abuses and the exploitations of the establishment. It was no easy task. He derived no joy from the role of being a prophet of doom. He was bitterly resented for what he had to say. No one wanted to hear that their temple would be destroyed or that the reign of King Jereboam would be annihilated. In his role as a moral conscience and a fierce critic of the power structure, Amos used the analogy of the plumb line alongside the sagging wall to indicate just how far out of line their lives had become. He told them what they didn't want to hear and they resented it.

People can't bear very much reality and are uncomfortable in the presence of a moral conscience. It is one thing to be in direct opposition to God, but a far worse to be indifferent to God. We live in an increasingly secular society where religion has little or no influence except among those who exploit it for political purposes.

Five hundred years later another prophet appears on the scene. He is John the Baptist, a prophet who speaks his mind boldly against the immorality of his time. In contrast to Amos, John is well qualified to articulate God's message to the people in those times. He is a cousin of Jesus and biblical scholars tell us Jesus spent his early years with John in the monastic community of Qumran down near the Dead Sea. John attracted great crowds with his dynamic preaching and when Jesus presented himself to be baptized as an example for the rest of us, John reluctantly and humbly honored his request.

John is a man of genuine character and humility. He lives an ascetic life of self-denial and because he attracts his own following he makes sure that no one confuses him with the Messiah. He always points beyond himself to Jesus as the Christ, the true Messiah. He is the "voice crying out in the wilderness" calling people to repentance. When he speaks out against immorality without regard to anyone's status, he knows that he does so at his own peril. When he denounces King Herod Antipas for taking Herodius, his brother's wife for his own, it lands him in prison. Herodius has a grudge against John and wants him put to death. Herod is reluctant because he fears the people and believes that John is a good and just man. When Herod promises his daughter Salome anything she wants, she asks for John's execution and Herod reluctantly consents to it. Even though he has the power and authority to prevent it, he does not have the moral courage to stop it. He is swayed by his obligation to honor his daughter's wish.

Both prophets, Amos and John the Baptist speak out against the immorality of prominent public officials. It takes courage to speak out against a sinful lifestyle and it is difficult for them to hear the truth about themselves. It is equally difficult to own up to it when the scandalous details are revealed.

You no doubt have read about public officials involved in scandals involving corrupt politics, financial schemes and illicit affairs. Whether it is Governor Mark Spitzer, Senator John Edwards, Senator John Ensign or Governor Mark Sanford, when a scandal breaks out it is painful for their spouses to endure the humiliation of having all the details become public. One prominent politician, after first denying any involvement and then having to confess, was asked why he did it. His response was simply that the opportunity was there and he knew that he could do it. Some of them had hypocritically decried the behavior of other political figures and then have to accept responsibility for their own actions. They pathetically profess love for their wives and family and ask for forgiveness, left to ponder whether or not to try to stay in office.

It was Henry Kissinger who famously said that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. What people in positions of power forget is that they are not above the law or morality. Their lapses have far reaching consequences from the loss of their marriage and family to the loss of confidence by the people who elected them. A public office is a public trust and the public is not willing to put up with those who betray that trust. Public officials must abide by a standard of decency that applies to everyone. It is a tremendously foolish risk to get involved in an affair outside of marriage. After the damage is done it is difficult to repair the relationship with spouse, family and constituents.

Being faithful in marriage is important to maintaining trust in a relationship. When you love someone, you may experience fantasies and temptation, but giving into temptation hurts the ones you love and betrays the trust you had.

Our relationship with God must never be taken for granted. The Ten Commandments are not suggestions. They are commandments and adultery is one of them. God takes each and every one of them very seriously. God takes our relationship very seriously and expects nothing less from us.