

Thank the worship team. It's so good to gather together and sing, to make a joyful noise to the Lord, as it says in Psalm 100, to express our worship to God as His people. But as we gather together to sing and to collect an offering to serve our community, I want to draw your attention to one of a handful of times in the Old Testament where God speaks through one of His prophets and gives a truly provocative comment on His people's worship that I believe is essential for God's people to consider today. This is Amos 5:21-24:

Amos 5:21–24 - “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

What a picture painted here by God through his prophet Amos, God closing his ears to the songs of his children and turning up his nose at their religious gatherings and rejecting their offerings. I think we would be wise to take this passage and this picture of God to heart as we gather together to sing and to give our offerings and our worship today.

If you're unfamiliar with Amos, Amos was a prophet raised up by God near the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, before Assyria destroyed Israel in 722 BC. Remember that when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt many centuries before that, they came to Mount Sinai, where God made a **covenant** with Moses and the people – I will be your God, you will be my people, these are the laws governing what it means to be my people, and if you follow them, these good things will happen – peace, prosperity, abundance – and if you disobey them, these are the bad things that will happen – famine, disease, invading armies from other nations. And whenever Israel was breaking the covenant and in danger of bringing the covenant curses upon themselves, God would send them a prophet to be His spokesperson to call His people to repentance and back to faithfulness to the covenant. In this case, the main issues that Amos confronted Israel about were idolatry – worshiping false gods – and injustice. And in this incredible passage, God tells them that he can not stand their religious feasts and

gatherings. He tells them to stop playing their worship songs, because He is not listening. And it has nothing to do with the style of music, but everything to do with two key features that are lacking from their community: **justice and righteousness**. As God concludes through Amos in verse 24: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

So what are justice and righteousness? Justice is the Hebrew word **Mishpat**, which refers to treating people equitably. It was mainly related to the courts, and referred to acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Giving people what they are due and not being biased on the basis of economic status or race or gender or anything else. Or, in business, it is dealing with people fairly and equitably and not taking advantage of people. Think of Leviticus 19:15:

Leviticus 19:15 – “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”

One important element of justice was restorative justice, justice that establishes the rights of people, lifting up the vulnerable in the community. God has always been particularly concerned about those who do not have social standing:

Psalms 68:5 - A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

It is incredible how often throughout the Bible we see God portrayed as the defender or advocate of **four main classes of people**: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor, all of whom had no social power in those days. God is particularly concerned that those who have little social power, those who are disenfranchised, those who are particularly in need of assistance, are cared for and lifted up by His people. Today, that list could include the refugee, migrant worker, homeless, the mentally ill, and many single parents and elderly people. As far as God is concerned, to neglect these people is a violation of justice. The follower of God, if he or she is trying to live like Jesus, will look for opportunities to lift people like this out of poverty or oppression.

Micah 6:8 - He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Now, let me stop for a moment. How many of you, as soon as I said the word immigrant, immediately started filtering this sermon through your political framework? Can I encourage you this morning not to do that? The words spoken through Amos were to God's people, who at that time were a nation. **And these words today that I speak are also to God's people, His church.** This is not about Republicans or Democrats. This is about us as God's people and what it means for us to follow Him as His covenant people.

So justice refers to treating people equitably, particularly establishing the rights of those who lack rights, lifting up the oppressed and vulnerable. What about righteousness? **Righteousness is tzadeqah** – in the OT, this is not mainly about private morality, but is a life of right relationships. To be righteous means to be rightly related to God and rightly related to others. On the vertical dimension, it means living in love and obedience with God. And on the horizontal dimension, it means treating others with fairness and generosity. Once again, it is particularly seen Biblically in how God's people treat the poor and vulnerable and those who are disenfranchised.

For example, Job was considered righteous. Look at how he described himself:

Job 31:16-22 – *“If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, ¹⁷ if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless-- ¹⁸ but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow-- ¹⁹ if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, ²⁰ and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, ²¹ if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, ²² then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint.”*

The righteous person treats those with lower social status fairly, lifting them up, not simply living for oneself. They are willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the community. Throughout the OT were many

examples of what this should look like in God's society. **Think of God's provision of manna** in the wilderness – gather only enough for yourself for the day, leave some for the rest. Hoard it and it will rot. **Or the gleaning laws** in Deuteronomy 24, where God tells His people that when they are harvesting their field, they should leave some for the immigrant, the fatherless and the widow, so that they can gather some for themselves. **Or think of tithing** - every third year, tithes were put in public storehouses so that the poor, aliens, fatherless, and widows would receive them. **Or the laws about debts** - in Deuteronomy 15, God tells his people that at the end of every seven years, they should cancel any debts owed by other Israelites to them, so that there would be no poor among them.

God's heart is for justice and righteousness. And in Amos 5:21-24, God tells His people in no uncertain terms that more important to Him than their offering, their singing, or their religious gatherings and festivals is that they would be a people of justice and righteousness. Isaiah 58 is another poignant example of what true worship looks like to God:

Isaiah 58:3-11 - 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for **lying on sackcloth and ashes**? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be **your rear guard**. ⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,

then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Are you understanding the heart of God for His people? His desire is that we would be just and righteous, treating people equitably and lifting up those who are oppressed and vulnerable, sharing what we have and working for their rights, being willing to sacrifice and disadvantage ourselves for the good of others.

And just in case you think this is an Old Testament teaching, consider what we read in the New Testament. Think about the **parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37**, where a Samaritan stops to help an Israelite who has been beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Jesus tells this parable to illustrate that loving your neighbor means being willing to inconvenience yourself, risk your own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy.

Think of Matthew 25, where Jesus told another parable about the final judgment, and how God will separate the people like a farmer separating the sheep from the goats, and that part of our final judgment when we stand before him will depend upon how we treated “the least of these” – we gave something to eat to the hungry, something to drink to the thirsty. We invited the stranger in and gave clothes to those who needed it. We visited the prisoner and cared for the sick.

In **Matthew 25:40**, Jesus says, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” This is the God of the universe telling us that He identifies with the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner, so much so that however we treat them is how we are treating God.

And I think of Jesus in **Matthew 5:23-24**, where he said “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” Once

again, we hear the heart of God – more important to me than the songs you sing or the offerings you bring is that there would be justice and righteousness – right relationships between my people.

The words that God spoke through the prophet Amos to the Israelites so many millennia ago stand for us today. It is good and right for us to gather together, to sing songs to the Lord, to give Him the worship He deserves. But God's primary concern is not about the quality of our music or the orderliness of our worship service. His primary concern is about justice – do we treat people equitably – and righteousness – are we rightly related to Him and to others? And once again, this is not primarily about politics and who you vote for, although that does matter in a democracy.

The one main difference between Israel's situation in the time of Amos and our situation today is that we are no longer under the old, Mosaic covenant. In the end, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came to live perfectly God's law and die on the cross to pay the penalty for all the ways that we broke God's covenant, for all of our injustice and unrighteousness. And now, those of us who have trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and enthroned Him as Lord of our lives are under the new covenant. Our salvation does not depend upon how just and righteous we are, for as Paul wrote in Romans 3, there is no one righteous. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are not being called to be a people of justice and righteousness out of fear of famine, disease, or invasion by Canada. No, we are being called to love others as Jesus loved us, to lift others up the way Jesus lifted us out of our spiritual poverty, to show mercy and God has showed us mercy. We are called to be people of justice and righteousness so that God might receive the praise and honor that He deserves, and so that the world might know the beauty of God and His kingdom.

Do you understand the opportunity we have in our world today? There is such hatred, division, greed, and oppression in this world. And there is such an opportunity for you and for us to be salt and light, to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, lift up the poor. And yes, I acknowledge that how this is done can be complicated. Sometimes it is relief to meet immediate needs. Sometimes it is development to help people move beyond dependency to self-sufficiency. Sometimes it is social reform – changing the conditions

and social structures that aggravate or cause dependency. But the opportunities are there.

One of the reasons the early church grew so much was because of their commitment to God as expressed through their justice and righteousness. **As the historian Rodney Stark put it about the rise of Christianity in a hostile Roman world:** “Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violence and ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”

And as the Roman Emperor Julian in 4th century put it: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

Church, let us continue to gather together to sing songs to God and offer ourselves to Him. But let our worship be about more than just songs and offerings, but about how we work to establish justice and righteousness in a way that honors God and lifts others up. Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream.