

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 14, 2024

Amos 7:7-15

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Too many people today are only hearing what their itching ears want to hear.¹ If an opposing opinion is encountered, it is only heard to more vociferously disagree with it. Social media uses algorithms to manipulate the masses into deeply divided camps. You click away, becoming more angry, less compassionate, and degraded. News outlets profit off fear-mongering, convincing you that your neighbor with different political views is your enemy, your biggest threat. Dark pessimism and cloudy distrust have settled over our hearts. The oversimplified caricature of those who differ with us comes to be preferred above nuance, moderation, and genuine understanding.

Christians should be on guard against falling into an echo chamber of our own. The current political powers and those who seek power will utter pleasant words to convince you that they are on your side. Talking heads will use their influence to garner support for their pet issues or candidates, all the while exploiting your moral principles. They do this at no real risk to themselves, yet they pretend to be prophets and martyrs. They seek their own advantage in our cleverly devised political system. Meanwhile, the masses are led to civil disorder, civil strife, and even civil war. What we saw yesterday in the attack on former President Trump is a consequence of such political discourse, but it isn't new. Political violence is a sad reality we have been sheltered from, but it is not uncommon in the world. We have frequently fallen into this pattern by heeding popular voices, commentators whose commercial success depends on your corruption. Your soul is at risk when you imbibe content that makes it harder for you to be like Christ. We should turn away from things that make it harder for us to love our neighbors, turn away from things that make it harder for us to love the stranger, and turn away from things that make it harder for us to love God and the world He created and redeemed.

No one likes hearing what they don't want to hear, but depending on the message, it might be good for you. A tree needs to resist the wind to build its tensile strength. The challenge of standing up to the wind makes the limbs more robust and resilient in the long run. You are much the same. Being challenged just might make you stronger and resilient. However, this requires some time of being flexible. Becoming rigid too early will render you brittle and easily broken. The prophets were not popular, but their messages were good for the people. The emotional reaction against their unpopular words was outrage, indignation, defensive self-righteousness, and unreasoned rejection of the message, the messenger, and the source of the message, God. Amos was told to shut up, to go home and spread his gloomy message there.² When Jeremiah told Judah their situation was hopeless in the short term, that all their political schemes would be exposed and fail, they vilified, threatened, and imprisoned the prophet. Judah refused the call to repent, to deal

¹ 2 Timothy 4:3

² Amos 7:12

justly with each other, to cease oppression of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, to stop shedding innocent blood, and to turn from false gods.³ Their ears were not ready to hear such words, so they went on in their delusions.

Just as the prophets of old were not well received by political and religious powers, so too John faced opposition for speaking truth to power. Herod Antipas is an example of the worst kind of political authority. He inherited his territory with Rome's support, so he should have been able to maintain his position easily.⁴ Instead, Herod's desire for his half-brother's wife, Herodias, led him to divorce his first wife, who just happened to be the daughter of an Arab king, Aretas, ruler of Petra.⁵ His marriage to Herodias violated Levitical law, but it was also politically foolish. The insulting dismissal of the first wife provoked Aretas to attack and defeat a contingent of Herod's men on the eastern border. The only thing that saved Herod from further humiliation was Roman intervention.

It is easy to focus on the tawdry, lurid details of the reading for today, but this causes us to overlook bigger issues. People in power often become delusional. They assert autonomy as if the rules don't apply to them. They overestimate themselves, thinking through the force of their personality or the force of their will or the force of their arms, they can accomplish all their objectives. Their arrogance makes them rash, and the worst possible outcome is for them to get away with it, because they will never learn. Herod's rashness can be seen in his response to John's criticism. First, he arrested him to avoid the public embarrassment of having a public critic who wouldn't pipe down. Then, he hosted a wild party, and his lascivious enthusiasm for his niece caused him to write a check that only John's head could cash. Many people of the time believed that Herod's military defeat was the result of divine judgment for killing John. Perhaps Herod should have listened to his critic instead of killing him.

Some people long for power, assuming that they would know how to use it. No one knows for sure how a high-status position will change them. The heart is deceitful above all things, a thing not to be trusted. If you are honest, you are not sure you could be trusted with great power, no matter how highly you think of yourself. Misuses of power are not confined to politicians. They are seen in how you treat your children, your spouse, your friends, your co-workers, the barista, and the bartender. What evil would you resort to if you could get away with it? One ring to rule them all? We would be reduced to Gollum, pathetic, enslaved, consumed, and corrupt.⁶ A great thinker once said, "I am very conscious that I am not wise at all... I do not think I know what I do not know"⁷ That was a high point of human wisdom. Humble, curious, always listening, Socrates wasn't well received either. The masses didn't want to hear his questions or what he had to say.

When nations en masse decide to shut their ears to what they don't want to hear, civilization decays. Yet the prophet must continue to speak a divine word to the people. Prophets

³ Jeremiah 7:5-7

⁴ Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Manfield (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 6-7.

⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18:109-119 (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 581.

⁶ Popularized by Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings*, the origin of this example is Plato's *Republic*, in which Glaucon presses Socrates to explain why it is better to be just than unjust. Most would become unjust if they had the power to do so.

⁷ Plato, *The Apology* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 26.

typically do not have formal political authority, rather they are voices of influence. As voices of influence, they are called to speak truth to power, to challenge the status quo, to question corrupt values, and disrupt the current social trajectory. When the false popular mantra is “Peace, Peace” the prophet steps in to say there is no peace.⁸ When zealous voices of violence screech for war, the prophets call for peace. Prophets utter spirit-filled words of accountability. Some are quiet and easy to ignore. Some are bold and relentless in their style. Both are divine winds intended to bring about change, to challenge the people to be better. Prophets are to care for the people they are calling to repentance. Jonah’s fault was that he didn’t actually care about the strangers of Ninevah. He despised them. John the Baptizer was popular with many people because of the purity of his message and the consistency with which he applied it to himself and others. Jesus was a prophet, dishonored in His hometown, but filled with compassion for stranger and neighbor alike. Despite the accusations against Him, rather than cozy up to earthly authorities, Christ defended the marginalized and ostracized.

Prophets are the lamenters of the present for the sake of the future. The zealots and despisers of existence will clamor for civil war. The greedy will turn chaos into profit through theft and exploitation. Our response should match that of the prophets, speaking truth to power, then bitterly lamenting the declining state of affairs. Jeremiah cried out on behalf of Judah, “See, O Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside, the sword bereaves; inside there is only death.”⁹ Jesus wept over Jerusalem when He saw its coming destruction.¹⁰ The last thing we should do is gloat over the consequences of moral decay as if it represents a victory in a zero-sum game.

As much of the world longs for words that will tickle their ears, confirm their biases, and drive deeper wedges between people, we ought to look for a godly unity that begins and ends with Christ and His word. We don’t rely on works for salvation, but our works should consistently testify to what we confess with our lips. Christ sought unity with all humanity, that is why He became man. It is an insult to His work on the cross and the life-giving faith He worked in you to play a part in clamoring for violence and discord. As we are influenced by the cacophonous hum of voices, we should strive to pay attention to those who risk much with little to no potential reward. Most likely, such voices will make you a little uneasy, a little defensive, and challenge you to change yourself. Until we are fully like Christ, His call will be for us to change, to be remade in His image. Ironically, as we become more like Him, we become more ourselves, more of what He has made us to be.

There is an ancient parable in Jewish tradition, though it probably originated elsewhere. The parable is about a reed and an oak tree. The reed is blown by the heaviest of winds, and its flexibility keeps it alive. The oak tree is much stronger, but its rigidity makes it more likely to be broken. Knowing the right time to emulate each one requires much wisdom. In both cases, the challenge of the winds reveals the true nature of the being.

⁸ Jeremiah 6:14.

⁹ Lamentations 1:20.

¹⁰ Luke 19:41-44.

John was not a reed blown by the wind. He was an oak, like so many prophets before him. He stood up for what was righteous, speaking truth to power, serving as the conscience of the state,¹¹ and the state broke him. Jesus was flexible in some ways. He prioritized love for others above ceremonial purity, bending rules where others held to them with absolute certainty. He was also like the oak tree, facing the most powerful winds that darkness, Satan, and political powers could throw at Him. Those forces pinned Jesus to a tree, and for a time, it looked as though the winds of wickedness broke Him as well. In the resurrection, however, a restored oak emerges as the eternal tree of life.

If we take the time to listen, God still speaks to us. He speaks to us through His Word, that which is proclaimed in His Church throughout the world. Though the message may not always be easy to hear, let us embrace correction by repenting and put our hope in the Gospel. God also speaks to us through our neighbors and strangers, and neighbors and strangers are an opportunity for us to love the God who created us all. Christ took upon Himself the sinfulness of all the world in order to redeem it. Need we be so bothered by hearing words we don't like, or by politicians we don't agree with? Do not allow a vile assassination attempt to send you into an abyss of conspiracy, darkness, and suspicion. Lament that such wickedness exists and that reckless rhetoric ignites the fuses of unstable lawless rebels. Christ came so we may have peace. Actual peace in the middle of personal struggles and political strife. Focus on what we can know, and find hope in that. In the months ahead, as this nation holds yet another election, even in the face of political violence, may we who are in Christ, open our ears to His voice, and find strength and peace in Him alone. His is the light that will dispense with the dark chambers and destructive clouds of pessimism.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Knock at Midnight*, February 11, 1962.