

Sermon Draft

Text: Amos 6:1–7

Sermon: Love One Another

The Sundays after Pentecost commonly include Lessons that instruct God's people in living out the Christian life. Today's Old Testament Reading *and* Gospel do just this, teaching a life that pleases God in both will and deed by caring for our neighbors.

The shepherd prophet Amos preached to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, serving as God's seer during King Jeroboam II's reign (793–753 BC). He preached the Word of God as Assyria threatened this region with its military might. Yet during this time, the people of God enjoyed a prosperous economy. This prosperity led them to forget God and instead to become arrogant when considering the needs of others. As God's judgment in the form of an Assyrian conquest loomed, Amos boldly applied God's Law, calling Israel to repent of her haughtiness or else face disaster.

Helping our neighbor is our ongoing task as Christians. That is to say, as the people of God, we live for others; we love our neighbors as ourselves.

But from the Old Testament prophet Amos, our text: ***“Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria . . . but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!”***

Loving others as ourselves is a biblical theme revealed early in the Scriptures. In the Bible’s first book—the Book of Genesis—we hear a story of how sin corrupted people’s desire for God and others. In Genesis, Moses writes of how ten brothers were guilty of not loving their neighbor as themselves. In this story, their neighbor wasn’t a stranger needing assistance. Their neighbor was their brother Joseph.

Jealous because of their father's favoritism toward Joseph (Gen 37:4), upset that Joseph's dreams predicted that he would one day rule them (37:8, 11), Joseph's brothers wanted him to disappear.

We read: ***"And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it"*** (37:24). Soon the brothers sold Joseph to traders, Ishmaelites (37:28), and he landed in Egypt.

Brother Joseph suffered. While in the pit, he had no water. He cried out in distress (42:21), but the brothers didn't care. Instead of caring about Joseph's suffering (and reversing their sinister plot), they ate a meal (37:25). The brothers considered themselves first, caring for their own needs. They ignored their brother's needs. They were not mindful of the needs of others. Woe to these brothers!

Today's text from Amos reminds us of Joseph's suffering and his brothers' unfortunate, careless reaction. God's eighth century BC prophet used Joseph's story as a way to speak God's Word of Law to God's people: **"Woe to those who . . . are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!"** By appealing to this familiar story, Amos hoped to resonate with his own hearers. After all, God's indictment against his people during this era was that they lived for themselves. **"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria."** Like Joseph's brothers, Jerusalem and Samaria in Amos's day considered their needs first. They were living in luxury. Amos described this lavish life in our text: **"Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like**

David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils.”

Amos captured his hearers’ “me-first” attitude. But did you notice the recurring first word in these sections of the text? Again and again the first word is “Woe.” Woe isn’t a pleasant word. *Woe* means “Warning! Pay attention.” Woe predicts the Day of the Lord’s judgment. The Day of the Lord will not be pretty for these people! Woe to these Israelites!

The situation in Amos’s day is similar to the situation Jesus presents in today’s Gospel, the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31). Like Joseph’s brothers, and like the Israelites in Amos’s day, the rich man cared only for himself. He feasted sumptuously. He wore expensive clothes. Yet his neighbor Lazarus—his “Joseph”—begged for crumbs of food.

Unfortunately, instead of caring for his neighbor, the rich man opted to gratify his own pleasures. That choice was a poor choice. What God predicted through Amos for such people—divine judgment and destruction—became reality in the rich man’s life. The rich man experienced what Amos prophesied: he would spend eternity in hell, separated from God. Woe to this rich man.

“Woe” isn’t spoken only to these biblical bad examples of careless living. “Woe” is spoken to you and to me, to all people, for we all have a sinful nature. The devil entices all of us to treat ourselves as first, ahead of others. Woe to you, people of God, people declared to be without sin on account of Jesus and people who by Baptism are dead to selfish sinful behavior and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Woe to you who at times live as the world lives, living in a lavish land of abundance that you use for personal gain.

Woe to you, who at times act like Joseph's brothers, like Amos's hearers, like the rich man in today's Gospel. Keep living like these bad examples, fail to heed the call of repentance and faith, and you'll be first, all right—first among equals in hell!

God's "woe" stings. It accuses even us baptized Christians, who sin daily and need God's forgiveness. We assess our lives and realize that at times we fail to care for the people God puts in our lives. We know that we deserve hell for our sinful selfishness.

But we also know that our way out of eternal suffering isn't doing better in helping the Josephs in our lives. That will never earn us salvation or the favor of God. As Christians, we have a better reason to help others—and that *is* our certain deliverance from hell.

While we feel the sting of God's "woe," we who have been baptized also have God's Word of promise: we are "blessed." Now there's a sweet word! On account of Jesus, we are blessed! All our sins are washed away, our missed opportunities, our failures, our egocentric actions, and your times of yielding to the devil, the world, and our sinful nature's "me-first" focus. Our sins are all washed away! Jesus' innocent blood shed for us on the cross cleanses us from the filth of our self-centered focus. He restores our focus. He puts our focus on him, on his love for us. He does this by speaking the Absolution through his ordained servant, by whom Jesus also delivers to us his true body and blood, which in turn creates "fervent love toward one another" (*LSB*, p. 166). Here, Jesus places our focus on him, and by extension on our neighbors in need.

Out of this focus flows love for those neighbors. We help others because helping others is a way we respond to God's forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Helping our neighbor is the ongoing task for the Christian. It's our task together, because that's what we Christians are to do. Not to justify ourselves or to make us look good among peers. But we simply live for others, meaning we love our neighbors as ourselves. With God's Gospel power, we endeavor in this worthy response to God's mercy for us.

Let us pray. Gracious Father, open our eyes to see Joseph, to see Lazarus, to see our neighbor so very near and so much in need, and open our eyes to see how you lavish your goodness upon us, for the sake of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen