

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**July 10, 2016; the 8th Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings:** Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37.

## **Breaking Us Open**

There is a saying, I think of C.S. Lewis, and probably others, that “prayer changes us, not God.”

What is our prayer today?

For whom do we prayer; for what do we pray?

Prayer breaks us open.

We certainly pray for those who have died in this last week from a tragic mix of racism, guns, fear, and hate.

We pray for those who have died: Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Lorne Ahrens, and Micah Johnson.

We pray for black men killed by police, for police killed by a black man, and for that man who also died.

We pray for all who died and the shooter in Dallas, because all are children of God.

We pray for an end to racism, an end to gun violence, we pray for peace and understanding among all people.

And when we pray these prayers, how does change us, and what do our prayers demand of us?

I've just marked my 3rd anniversary with you as your priest, and it seems to me that ever since I got to

Richmond, we have been seeing black men,  
often young, shot and killed by police.  
Of course this was happening before I got here, but it  
seems to have been an undeniable reality for us as a  
community of faith in this nation in a huge way  
in the last three years.

We pray and we try to discern where God is in all this.  
We pray and we seek to know, as our collect, our opening  
prayer for today states... that God would hear our  
prayers and helps us to know and understand  
what things we ought to do and have the  
grace and power faithfully to  
accomplish them.

Prayer leads to action...ought to lead to action.

What helps us to know what we ought to do and be  
about?

What aids us in our prayer as we seek to discern?

The Bible helps us.

And our reading from Amos and our reading from Luke's  
Gospel seem to have been chosen by God for the  
circumstances we find ourselves in today.

Our sacred scripture was written by people who had a  
story to tell and a deep sense of God in that story.

And while much has changed since Biblical times, much  
about being human is the same.

Amos was a reluctant prophet who told God that he was  
just a regular guy, a herdsman and a dresser of  
sycamore trees, but the Lord took him from the  
following the flock and says, "Go and  
prophesy to my people...."

Sycamore trees in that region produced a small fruit of little taste, considered the fruit of the poor. But even to have that fruit, the husk in which the fruit ripened had to be pierced so that ripening could happen...and that's what the dresser did, he pierced the skin.

As God's prophet, this is what Amos also did, pierces the skin of people, their outer protection, with his words. Amos is sometimes called the most political book of the Bible.

Wait a minute, you might say, or some might say, politics and religion?

We have been discussing this recently as a community...the role of the Church in politics, what is political and what is not?

Amos is political in that the prophet sees injustice in the world around him, and speaks truth to power, to those who rule the people and support the unjust system.

We are political when we work to transform the polis, the city; but we are more than political...we are also faithful...faithful to God's dream for us, God's desire for all people.

Amos was very unpopular because of his prophecy that unjust actions would lead to a bad outcome for those in power.

Amaziah, the priest, sends word to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.

For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword...'

And Amaziah told Amos to leave Israel alone and go and prophesy to Judah.

Who are the prophets that we cannot bear to hear, and wish they would just go away.

Perhaps it is the news reports themselves that are showing us the ruin of our cities and speaking of tragedy to come?

For prophets are usually pointing out what is already happening...can you see it...can you bear to look at it.

Well, look at it and consider what God is calling you to do.

What do we see when we look around?

We see this endless violence --- of various types --- guns are a part of all of it --- school shootings, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook -- we see police shootings of a disproportionate number of young black men.

We see five police officers killed and seven wounded, all were armed but they could not take down one sniper, before he did what he did.

How much of a prophet does one need to be to know that if we continue on the path we have been on, this is only going to get worse...that was the message of Amos, and he was correct.

It has been said that "Prophecy is the gifted ability to see what other people cannot or will not see.

Prophets focus primarily on the moral and spiritual condition of a nation; they do not simply predict future events, but warn of consequences to injustice.

Do you see, the prophet says?

There is the plumbline clear as day showing how to build  
the wall, as gravity causes it to show what is straight  
and what is not.

Do you it?

Others see it.

The Bahamas issued a travel advisory yesterday for  
young men traveling to the United States...advising  
that they cooperate with police and not be  
confrontational, that they “exercise extreme  
caution” in their interactions with police.

God has a different dream for us, for every person in this  
nation and on the planet...a different dream, a  
different plan.

As Willis Jenkins writes: “Recall that one of Martin Luther  
King’s trademark lines came from Amos.

In speeches and sermons over his life from Montgomery  
to Memphis, King would clinch the power of an  
oration by proclaiming, ‘Let justice roll down like  
waters, and righteousness like an  
everflowing stream’ (5:24).

King would consistently name his anticipation of beloved  
community with words from a prophet condemning a  
people to death.”<sup>1</sup>

What will need to die in our nation for us to move into Dr.  
King’s dream for us...into God’s dream of which Dr.  
King was a prophet?

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol., 3*, Willis Jenkins “Theological Perspective,” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., Loc. 8027 of 14296.

What will need to die in our nation and in our hearts for us  
to embrace justice and righteousness, to put an end  
to racism and gun violence?

Already, we see our brothers and sisters dying in the  
streets, in the schools, in the clubs, practically every  
day.

And I'm not even touching on the wars and violence  
between nations and people and terrorists.

We are all Americans, and we are doing this to each  
other.

Think about that.

When I lived in England in the 1990s, I will never forget  
hearing a British police officer being interviewed by  
an US journalist.

The journalist asked the officer if he would starting  
carrying a gun since it seemed his job was getting  
more dangerous.

And the officer said with great surprise that he was being  
asked this question,

“Why would I want to carry a gun?

I would not want to shoot my own people.”

And this brings me to the story of the Good Samaritan.

Who are my people; who is my neighbor?

There were many people of standing in the society who  
passed by the one who needed help, who had been  
beaten and left for dead on the side of the road.

They did not want to disrupt their lives...they did not want  
to be bothered...they did not want to see what was  
right there in front of them.

It was the Samaritan the outcast, who helped...who saw  
and acted.

The Samaritan is the hero of Jesus' story.

One of our prayers in the Prayers of the People today asks that we might be freed from asking, "who is our neighbor?"

I believe the intention of that prayer is that we would just know, and not have to ask.

This unexpected twist calls the lawyer to account if he is to live into Jesus' teaching...calls the lawyer to let some of his closely held beliefs about who is in and who is out die.

Perhaps he has to let his idea of himself as superior to others die...so that he might have eternal life, the fullness of life with God now.

For that is eternal life---seeing, having mercy, loving, and acting.

God is with us when we see, pray and act.

We become part of God's dream for all people, for all creation.

In this season of politics...

*"If we who are Christians participate in the political process and in the public discourse as we are called to do — the New Testament tells us that we are to participate in the life of the polis, in the life of our society — the principle on which Christians must vote is the principle, Does this look like love of neighbor?" – Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, March 2016*