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Friend or Enemy?

Amos 7:7-17

Luke 10:25-37

Introduction to Amos: To understand this story we need to know that the Kingdom of Israel is split into two separate countries – with different kings and different capitals. King Jeroboam ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had established Bethel (literally – the House of God) as the place where northern kingdom gathered to worship God. This was a strategic, nationalistic move to stop the Jews in the north from travelling south to Jerusalem to worship, because Jerusalem was the capital of the southern Kingdom of Judah. Amaziah is King Jeroboam’s priest – the chaplain to the King. Amos traveled from the Southern Kingdom of Judah to deliver words of judgment to the Northern Kingdom. So, to understand Amaziah’s response to Amos we need to remember that not only is Amos “Not from ‘round here”, but also that Amos is saying that God has judged Israel and has found the nation to be “out of plumb”, crooked, and no longer faithful. Amaziah’s response is to call Amos an outside agitator, and to tell Amos to go back to where he came from (the south) and to say his words of condemnation there! Amos is not welcome there, because Bethel - this House of God - belongs to the King! Amaziah – amazingly – speaks an ironic truth that should strike fear into our hearts. The Temple and the Sanctuary of Bethel existed to serve the King and the Kingdom – not God. Amos answers Amaziah’s dismissive rant by saying that he is not paid to be a prophet, instead he left his daily work because God called him to come from the Southern Kingdom to the Northern Kingdom to speak this message of judgment, and whether Amaziah wants to believe it or not – judgment, death, destruction and exile are coming.

Introduction to Luke: Our Gospel lesson today is perhaps one of the best known stories in all of Scripture. Even people who have never read Scripture know what a “Good Samaritan” is. Douglas John Hall wrote that we would not go wrong to use this parable to describe the essence of the Christian faith.ⁱ But, what I’d like for you to see today is the context of the story. This story is told in the context of testing and challenge. The lawyer or scribe – one schooled in the interpretation of Mosaic Law – tests Jesus by asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The Scribe then shows that he already knows the answer to his own question by answering his own question with Scripture he had memorized. And Jesus confirms his answer. What God is up

to in the world – the way to live as a disciple of God is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself. (Lk 10:27) The exchange would have ended there, except the real motive of the lawyer was not to find out how to be saved, but was instead to test Jesus and to prove himself righteous. Luke tells us that he wanted “to justify himself.” So, he presses Jesus – “Who is my neighbor?” Who do I have to love, and whom do I not have to love? How do you define neighbor? And Jesus answers that question in a way that refuses to let us off the hook, and in a way that should leave us feeling slightly queasy.

There are people who believe that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment, fear and anger, but that the God of the New Testament is a God of love, grace and mercy. And for these folks, the passages we read today might seem to prove this dichotomy. God speaks, through the prophet Amos, to bring a word of judgment, death and exile to God’s people in Israel. And in the New Testament, God speaks through Jesus to remind us that loving as God loves has no boundaries or limits. In the Amos passage we read, God is the enemy. Amaziah believes that he knows what is right and true, and Amos’s message is a threat to everything that Amaziah holds dear. Amos’ message is nothing if it is not fearful, terrible and bad news. So, Amaziah tells Amos to take his message and go back home. But within a generation, Amos’ message came true. The northern nation of Israel was defeated by the army of Assyria and the people who listened to Amaziah and believed him were killed by the sword or taken into slavery in a faraway land. So, clearly, God is the enemy – angry and judgmental - right?

So often, when we get bad news or something bad happens to us, we cry and wail and call on God to relieve our suffering. Anyone here ever been in the midst of suffering or grief and called on God to fix things? Why, O God, have you abandoned us? What have we ever done to deserve this suffering? The preacher tells us that we are “loved, known and claimed” by God, but all we feel is absence and suffering and pain. God feels like the enemy we must get past, or at least absent from our universe.

God is only perceived to be a friend when things go the way we want them to go, and when we feel comfort, assurance and security. And in that view of the world, any word of challenge or judgment – any words that disagree with what we know to be true - must be false or dangerous. So when things are going well for us, God is a friend. But when things are not going well or it appears that we may be headed for suffering or evil, then God becomes the enemy. Right?

I was listening to a series of lectures on spiritual growth and faith in which a Roman Catholic brother told a story of having a person in a time of great suffering and uncertainty and grief ask him, “Is God the enemy or the friend?” And Brother Don Bisson replied, “God is both.”ⁱⁱ

When we divide the nature of God into an Old Testament God of judgment and anger and a New Testament God of love and grace, we are unable to hear the truth or to know, love or recognize God at all. When truth is judged by whether or not it agrees with what we think already, then we have made ourselves the center – rather than God. Instead, when we think of God we must always remember that God is BOTH friend and enemy, and our experience or knowledge of God all depends on whether we put ourselves or God at the center of reality.

Amaziah cannot hear the warning word of God because Amaziah is the King's Chaplain. He has power, privilege and success. What Amos says is not what Amaziah wants to hear – it threatens Amaziah's very life and job - so it must be wrong. And in the encounter between the lawyer and Jesus, the lawyer cannot understand or accept even the truth of the scripture he knows by heart– “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself” – because it might mean that he must include and love an enemy. Jesus is the enemy as long as he refuses to agree with and affirm the lawyer.

Instead of seeing ourselves and our privilege, power and comfort as the ruler/plumb line by which we judge truth, Amos offers God's plumb line. And to define the boundless nature of God's love and the love to which we are called, Jesus gives us the Gospel by which we are judged. Mercy and love are the plumb lines by which faith is judged – not nationalism, worthiness, success, power, or security.

God alone is God. God alone is the arbiter of truth. God alone is able to hold the plumb line so that we can tell what is crooked and what is straight. And, God has given us Scripture as a virtual plumb line. We are to compare our lives and what others tell us is true with what the people of God have come to recognize as the Word of God – in Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

And what Scripture and Jesus say is that God is always the friend of truth, justice, good, self-sacrifice, open hearted love, full body service, love, mercy and compassion. So when these are the fruit of our lives, God is the friend.

And God is always the enemy of falsehood, injustice, idolatry, evil, hate, greed, self-justification, and self-seeking. So, when we find ourselves on the side of wrong, God becomes our enemy.

ON April 12, 1963, while Martin Luther King, Jr. was in a Birmingham jail, eight white clergy men [7 Christian and 1 Rabbi] wrote and published a letter in the Alabama newspapers, asking citizens to withdraw support from the de-segregation demonstrations. They agreed with Dr. King that segregation needed to end, but they accused Dr. King of being an outside agitator and of inciting hate and violence. Four days later, Dr. King wrote his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* in response. Among those who signed that letter was Edward V. Ramage, the Moderator of the Synod of Alabama for the Presbyterian Church in the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ These white clergymen had so identified their own safety, privilege and status-quo with truth that they perceived what Dr. King said as a threat, false and dangerous. Those seven Christian clergy and one Rabbi had taken a leaf from Amaziah's playbook. And they showed that instead of serving truth and justice they were serving the stability and privilege of their congregations and of the system

that supported them. They were wrong. And while segregation is no longer legal in this country, it still exists because we who benefit from the systems of power and control that are in place continue to refuse to repent and to recognize God's truth in the call to racial justice and equal rights. Many call slavery "America's original sin." I believe that may be true. And until we repent and are willing to be changed, I believe we will continue to suffer the consequences of our sin – just as we suffer those consequences every single day in this country.

It is also important to say that while God is the friend of truth, justice, good, self-sacrifice, open hearted love and full body service, love, mercy and compassion, it is not enough for us to say that we believe that or to simply give our assent. It is not enough for us to sit in the beauty and safety of this sanctuary and say that we are committed to love the Lord with our heart, soul, strength and mind unless we are also willing to live out those commitments.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that we do not want to be inconvenienced for love, or to have to get our hands dirty, or give up a Saturday morning for the sake of someone needing help. We do not want the system that provides us with privilege to change. The priest and the Levite had, no doubt, lots of good reasons for not stopping to help the injured man. But none of those mattered. What mattered was that they – like the Samaritan travelling that same road– were responsible to live out their faith commitments. But the priest and Levite did not. I'm willing to bet that when the priest and Levite saw the injured man they did not see an opportunity to love God, self and neighbor, instead they saw an inconvenience, a danger, a need that they could not meet and a time commitment that they were unwilling to give.

Whenever God calls us to love an enemy – constrained by fear, lack of time and a need for self-justification – we hear the call of God as the enemy. To answer the call to love God with heart, soul, strength and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves is NEVER a call to safety or security or self-justification. God calls us to vulnerability, to get our hands dirty in bandaging our neighbors' wounds and to spend our hard-earned money to provide for the needs of those who have no place to sleep. Only when we answer the call to love will God be our friend.

We all have our own enemy lists. I don't know what your enemy list looks like: maybe your enemy is the progressive or the conservative, the Jew or the Muslim, the migrant, the LGBTQ person, the poor, the rich, the black, the Hispanic, the mentally ill, the person in need of health care, or the homeless. We all have our own lists of folks that we hope Jesus won't mention when we ask him, "Who is my neighbor?" We all have our own self-justifying discussions about why we can't include people who don't agree with us in our friend groups, our churches, and in our families. But, today we have the opportunity to listen and to learn from the blindness of Amariah and the pride of the lawyer. Instead of launching into attack mode, Scripture calls us to stop and to ask ourselves, "Could this be God speaking to me? Could they be right? Where is God's truth in this? Are we refusing to listen and refusing to love because we are afraid, or because our belief protects our own privilege? Could we be wrong? Have we confused our own truth for God's truth? Have we confused our own privilege or opinion with God's? Have

we confused God's house with an American house? Does our truth serve God's purpose or my own privilege?

When we find ourselves full of good, rational reasons why we can't help someone who is identified as "the enemy," Scripture challenges us to stop and to ask ourselves, "Is this suffering something that I can address? Could this be my neighbor? Am I refusing to get my hands dirty because it is inconvenient, or am I willing to risk a disruption of my own schedule to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind and my neighbor as myself?" Remember what the Samaritan does is spend his time, energy, possessions, money and time to help his enemy who was in need.

Next time we meet our enemy, both Amos and Luke invite us to stop and say, is this message from God? Next time we see suffering that we are too busy or too afraid to address, we are to stop ourselves and ask, "could that be our neighbor?" Our challenge is to live in such a way that God is our friend and so that we can serve God's purpose? What must we do to inherit eternal life? Who is our neighbor? What would a friend of God's look like in this situation?

Scripture says that our own insights and opinions are not always trustworthy. God alone has the plumb line that is reliable. Our task is always to seek God's truth – when it agrees with our opinions and when it does not – and to measure our lives and opinions against God's command – Love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. And then to ALWAYS be ready to change our course of action, our opinions and our very lives to reflect God's truth.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3: p. 238

ⁱⁱ Brother Don Bisson – Individuation: Beyond "Happy and Normal" by YesNowProductions.com or donbisson.com

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk_day/statement.html