

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
All Saints' Church

July 15, 2018/Proper 10
Year B

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

One of the most disturbing calls I ever received from a student when I was Dean was just a few months before my whole life was going to change drastically, and I was going to become a part of All Saints' community as your Rector.

It was mid-May, a couple of weeks before graduation. The call came in around 11:00 pm from one of my favorite students.

"What's up, Sean?"

"We're in big trouble over here. One of our good friends is expecting a delivery of heroin through the mail." (Sidenote: there are entrepreneurs on the internet who can protect their identity, the drug dealers' identity and the buyer's identity, and with the right software and a little ingenuity, you can buy any kind of designer drug you want, as if you are shopping on Amazon, and it comes through the mail in a wonderfully in-descript neat brown paper bag package).

Sean continued, "All the guys want to intercept the package, flush the drug down the toilet, and just get our friend to graduation, but I don't think that's a good idea, that's why I am calling you. I think we need help."

I could hear in the background, familiar voices of good kids, protesting the call, pleading with me to let them "take care of it." Believe me, it was tempting. The right way, the way Sean was proposing, meant that the student would have to go home, risk his graduation. He was on full scholarship; a very bright kid- he was into college with a full ride. His mother was a single parent. I could hear her wailing. The police would have to be called. I would need to help find him a lawyer, pro-bono. And he was the lead in the play which was opening in a week.

Another student grabbed Sean's cell phone. "Dean Hamilton, it's just a dare; he's just being an idiot. We can take care of this. We're pleading with you. Let us manage it."

Tempting.

I could hear Sean in the background yelling, "Are you willing to take that kind of risk?"

"Put Sean back on the phone.... Sean, I'll be over in a few minutes. Tell everyone that they are great friends, and we'll get through this, and thank you; you did the right thing."

The right thing. This is what prophets are known for- doing the right thing, and it often leads to them getting their heads chopped off, either symbolically or literally.

Amos, like many prophets, was minding his own business, a farmer, a dresser of sycamore trees, when God called him to leave his home in the south, in Judah, and prophesy to Israel, in the north. At first Amos tried to talk God out of God's judgment, but then came the image of the plumb-line, condemning the crooked walls of the nation. You can't build a house on a faulty foundation, and so Amos, like any mason would tell us, if a wall is crooked, it should be torn down and rebuilt- else the entire house is in danger of collapse.

Meanwhile poor Amaziah, the Priest, is trying to negotiate between Amos, this Prophet of Truth, and Jeroboam, King of Israel, and the threat of the Assyrians who are on the warpath, ready to consume Israel. "Just go home Amos and let me try to hold all of these pieces together; leave us alone, we can handle it."

Poor Amaziah, naïve, in denial, doing his best, called to keep a nation under prayer and hope, has no idea how over his head he is. His way of life, and all of his people's way of living, is about to change. Israel will be conquered, and they will be sent into exile, to lean on their faith in a new and challenging and different way which will bring them to a stronger identity, but who can imagine that now?

In the midst of this school crisis, Sean and I were sharing a cup of tea together and a piece of pie. When in crisis, feed people. His friends were really angry with him; all the things I knew would happen to the student were happening, and the end of the term, which should be celebratory, was painful.

I asked him, "What gave you the strength to call me?"

"It was clear; I couldn't do otherwise; I knew that my friend was more vulnerable than people were making out. And all I could think of was his mother coming to gather up the dead body of her only son, and I would have to look her into the eye and tell her that I could have done something to save him. I couldn't live with that."

And with that, we both began to cry.

There's a good ending. The student got his high school degree. His scholarship at his college was secured, deferred for a year while he did a year of rehab work. He called me around July, asking for forgiveness and thanking me for my advocacy for him.

"I don't deserve any of this love and care and support. I was a complete idiot; I hurt a lot of people, and in denial about how crazy I was being, and how addicted I was to using drugs and trying to hold all the pieces together. I don't know if I really believe in God, and I am trying to make sense of a Higher Power.

"And yet, I do know the experience of Grace, and I'm going to try to live in it. Keep me in your prayers."

I don't know what has happened to this student. My guess is that next spring I will go to the school's five-year reunion; those boys, now young men, and I are tied together in ways that are very tight, and I will find out about all of their lives, and I look forward to being with them.

Meanwhile, there is an opioid crisis in our country, and particularly in New Hampshire and we're not holding all the pieces together. Last year, 59,000 to 64,000 people died because of addiction. That's more than who died in the Vietnam War.

In the midst of poverty, violence, addiction, fear, the Church is called to be society's prophet. To name the truth, to be clear about our role in making a difference. To do the right thing. And All Saints' is a part of this movement.

Our Presiding Bishop calls himself the CEO of the Episcopal Church- which stands for Chief Evangelism Officer and we are a part of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. And we are moving. Churches have been a part of this kind of outreach in the past, but now if we are not engaged, churches will be dying.

In September, we will be celebrating a very successful Capital Campaign. I have no doubt; we will meet our goal; your generosity and support of our mission is inspiring. Our emphasis has not been on how much to give, but rather to be a participant in our now and in our future, as we believe we are here for God, for all, and for good. We have been given the beauty of this beautiful sanctuary and campus, which is both a blessing and a curse.... But we are being responsible stewards and we are raising the funds to secure our buildings, and to build on our ministries.

When in crisis, feed people. The response to our gospel passage this morning is the feeding of the 5,000. And we are a part of feeding others and ourselves. And as we make stronger links between the Community Supper, the Peterborough Food Pantry, teachers, nurses and social workers in our schools, participants in the Senior Program at the Rec Center, our interfaith neighbors, and our Thanksgiving Day Community Meal, we are bringing the light of Christ, which as Paul reminds us, was present at Creation, to our Community so that in all the ways we live and move and have our being, we are centered on the plumb-line of God's grace and power.

A parishioner shared a wonderful image with me. "There's a change happening, and it's good. Rather than holding hands and centering around each other and our worship, and looking at each other, we have turned around, and with the altar as our backing, we are still holding hands, but now looking outward."

It's a circle that cannot be broken! And a plumb line that is straight. AMEN.