



Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 10)

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
13 July 2003

Amos 7.7–15

Ephesians 1.3–14

St. Mark 6.14–29

Herod knew that John the baptizer was a righteous and holy prophet. When Herod heard John, he was often greatly perplexed, and yet—and yet—he *liked to listen to him*. I too like to listen to the prophets. I especially like listening to prophets like Amos. What a way that guy has with words!! “Hear this, you fat cows who live in the high places...you, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your spouses, ‘Bring me more wine!’ The Lord God has sworn by all that is holy: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks through your noses, even the last of you with fishhooks.” Wow!! That’s great material for self-righteous ranting at the rich Republicans who run the governments of the land. Amos goes on and on railing at the rich who have plenty of the finest food to eat, who have plenty of time to lounge around on their couches and amuse themselves in idle games while consuming copious amounts of adult beverages, and he skewers the well-off who profit from government givebacks while the poor suffer disproportionate tax levies. That’s great stuff for standing in the pulpit and beating up on the affluent.

It’s great stuff and I like hearing it—until—until I look in the mirror at my expanding middle and the lifestyle that goes with it. And then the words of Amos begin to perplex me just as John the Batpizer’s words perplexed Herod. I live on one of the top floors of a luxurious high-rise—and my apartment’s large lanai has a killer view of the mountains and the Botanic Gardens and Cheeseman Park. And we have armed guards to protect us from the riff-raff. I have a well stocked liquor cabinet, and a bottle of Añejo Patrón Tequila is always icy-cold in the freezer. I like to buy my groceries at Marczyk’s Fine Foods on 17th —market with a great cheese counter, an olive bar with every kind of martini olive imaginable, and the best imported foods money can buy. So I really do understand Herod and his dilemma with that pesky prophet named John. My very own lifestyle is a seductive and tempting dance done by a scantily clad hunk of a hot dancer who shimmy-shakes himself up alongside of me and whispers lasciviously in my ear, “Here, have some fine wine to drink – forget the prophet’s cries. That justice rolling down like waters stuff sounds nice but you deserve all the good things you enjoy so much — after all your grandparents worked hard for what you’ve got. After all, you had the good sense to be born in the United States of America, so you’re entitled to be on top of the world. To hell with liberal guilt. Even Jesus said the poor will be with you always. Remember, you’re Lutheran, you don’t believe in good works. Off with the prophet’s head. You’ve got the real world to live in.” Yeah, I understand this King Herod fellow and the trouble he had with the dancing girl. I’m just like him!! The prophet’s words are like sower’s seed that falls among the thorns. Like Herod I like to *hear* the Word, but as I go on my way, I become perplexed, and the seed is choked by my caring for the riches and pleasures of life, and the grain does not mature.

But then I hear the voice of another. He doesn’t seem to dance much, but, oh, can that Paul ever sing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. God destined *us* for adoption as God’s first-born children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. *In him we have the forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us.*” Forget the seducing dancers: now you live for God. Now your worldly riches are as nothing—even

now God is tearing out the thorns of your care for riches and pleasure. Now, you are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, that same Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets.

There is a world of difference between a critic and a prophet. Movie critics, book critics, sports critics—they all criticize, but they themselves cannot make movies, write books, or play sports well. Prophets are something different; they proclaim God's will for a just distribution of the riches of creation—and they live it as well—because that is who God has made them to be, not through their own effort, reason, or strength, but ever, only, and always through the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. And we have this inheritance—through Christ, we have been adopted as the first born children of God, like Christ—completely righteous in God's eyes—children of God who let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-rolling stream. And like the prophets we are sealed in Holy Baptism with the mark of the Holy Spirit so that by the power of the Spirit we might be who we are. And we are fortified at the Lord's Supper, continually given strength to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly before our God.

But of course, there is cost. We are no longer comfortable and at ease here in this realm where riches come easily to the privileged. We who have been adopted as the first born of God can no longer turn a blind eye to injustice. We who are reborn as Christs to the world can no longer settle for a system in which some of us are rich while most of the world's people are desperately poor. We whose sins are forgiven according to the riches of God's grace, and who have been adopted as the first born of God, we have been anointed with the Spirit to be prophets with our very lives, and we have a great deal of work to do indeed.