

Trip to Harmon
Amos 4:1-3
July 11, 2010
First & Central Presbyterian Church
Wilmington, Delaware
©Douglas D. Gerds

In the early part of my seminary training, my wife Walle and I reversed roles in the household a bit which meant that I had greater responsibility for our kids, including carpool duties. Almost every weekday, I would transport a carload of 5 year-olds from elementary school to a cooperative kindergarten on the other side of town. Then I'd drive back downtown for a 1:00 class at the seminary I attended. One day I had the idea that if I'd listen to Christian radio, I could not only be entertained, but I could also deepen my spirituality and enhance my education! So I started listening to the local Christian station, WJMM (I'm not sure what the call letters signify but someone suggested in jest that they stand for "Where Jesus Means Money"). Well apparently my timing was good because I was able to catch a Bible study being broadcast beginning at Noon. The book of Amos was being examined by someone who sounded like an old Southern evangelist...the kind that makes "Jesus" into a 3 or 4 syllable word. Well, Rev. Radio was just starting chapter 4 so I turned up the volume and began to concentrate especially since at that time I had yet to take a class in the Hebrew Scriptures and knew basically nothing about the prophets.

He read the passage about the cows of Bashan, and then he started his exposition of the text. He began by identifying the "cows" as the homosexuals of Samaria who were the "kept" playmates of the powerful men of that city. The voice on my car radio went on to proclaim that just as the homosexual population was responsible for the eventual downfall of Samaria and Israel some 20 years after Amos, so too, they would be the imminent downfall of this great nation in even less time.

As I struggled to concentrate on my driving after hearing this startling revelation and proclamation, I remember thinking two things: One, that the destruction of American society as we know it today, was quite a feat to be accomplished by somewhere between 1 and 10% of the population; and two, that I'd have to take a class in Hebrew prophets sometime very soon.

I did take that class and discovered one of the great ironies of my seminary education. The cows of Bashan while having absolutely nothing to do with ancient homosexuals and/or their partners, have everything to do with you and me. You see, Bashan was a particularly fertile plateau in Samaria and it was consequently known for its exceptional livestock. Bashan in ancient Hebrew means "smooth soft earth." Now back in Kentucky, we knew all about fertile soil and exceptional livestock. People from the Queen of England to the Sultan of Brunei come to the Bluegrass to inspect and buy the thoroughbreds that are raised there. The Cows of Bashan are synonymous with the Thoroughbreds of the Bluegrass. They were pampered and prized animals, far superior to common stock, and in great demand. Amos used the term in reference to the pampered wives of the Samaritan aristocracy who benefited from their husbands' violent oppression of the poor of Israel. In other words, Amos takes to task those persons, who while not directly abusing those who are powerless, nevertheless benefit from that oppression.

Cows of Bashan, Thoroughbreds of the Bluegrass, you and me.

Now few, if any of us, are in the business of direct, violent oppression of persons in our midst. Though through the newspaper we hear reports of landlords or employers who take advantage of undocumented aliens. We hear of persons with disabilities who are routinely ripped off when they attempt to procure basic services. And we know that persons of color are systematically treated less than equally in issues of housing, education, and employment.

But Amos isn't leveling this volley at those persons guilty of front-line oppression; rather Amos is now going after people who profit indirectly from the pain of others. Perhaps today he'd have people in mind who are able to buy cheap goods in developed countries because people in developing countries are forced to work for starvation wages. Perhaps he'd have in mind stockholders of pharmaceutical companies who reap extraordinary dividends while the aging public spends an equally extraordinary share of their fixed income to buy necessary drugs. Perhaps Amos' modern day cows of Bashan would look like some of us who graze through American supermarkets or other "Big Box" marts choosing from the glut of products, while around the globe, 40,000 children per day die from hunger related diseases.

As we heard a couple of weeks ago, the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with stories of God sending prophets to shake up the status quo, to jar the comfortable from their slumber, and to bring people face to face with the reality of their actions and their lives. The purpose of the prophets was never condemnation per se, but rather to lead people to change their ways, to re-orient their lives, to repent and to live closer to the will of God. Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, the first president of the Republic of Zambia, has written, "What a nation needs more than anything else is not a Christian ruler in the palace but a Christian prophet within earshot." Amos, our prophet within earshot today, makes the point that no one is exempt from examination and scrutiny, not even the church.

The Presbyterian Church recently responded to the alarming number of mid-career pastors who leave the ministry – mostly because they are tired, worn out, and no longer have that burning desire they had when they entered seminary. Any number also took a cold hard look at their bank balances and decided that they were no longer able to adequately provide for their children's education or eventual retirement – and this was before the advent of the Great Recession.

Our friends on the Episcopal side of the aisle recognized that same problem and decided to do something about it. They engaged a number of social scientists, psychologists, physicians, and financial analysts and developed a program called "CREDO."

CREDO is an 8-day long event in which mid-career pastors are invited to a retreat center and led through a process of examination and scrutiny in 4 principle areas of our lives: financial, physical, spiritual, and vocational. It's not so much a retreat as it was a renovation. We were torn down a bit, encouraged to get to the core of our being and beliefs, and then given the tools to rebuild with intention and purpose.

I made a purposeful and conscious decision 20 years ago to enter the ministry. The pivotal event was the death of a young person. His name was Kevin, he was our son's best friend, and he'd be

25 today. He was 5 when he was struck by a car and killed on the street in front of his house. His parents faced a magnitude of grief that was frightening. They worked hard to face their tragedy together. Friends stayed close to offer love and support. Close proximity to a young person's death forced many of us to examine our own priorities and values. As trite as it may sound today, I recall the revelation that life is not a dress rehearsal. It's the only shot we get and we surely don't know how long it will last.

I had many of those same feelings and experiences at CREDO. I have limited time remaining in my career and the next milestone that I'll face professionally will be retirement. That's not for at least 8 more years and as I'm beginning my 8th year with you this month – I'm clearly mid-career at First & Central.

CREDO invited me to take stock of the most significant areas of my life and ministry. I did so with the help and guidance of folks who kept me honest and objective. One overarching question that we examined was whether or not we are realizing the goals, and hopes, and dreams that we had for ministry.

And I discovered that I haven't. At least, not enough.

I set out to show God's love. I set out to preach as honestly as I could. To examine scripture with fresh and clear thought. I set out to help build a church of love and integrity and diversity and justice. And I set out to never, ever, simply go through the motions of ministry, but to always be a pastor to the people, and to ask questions such as, "Is my calling sure? Is my vision clear? Is my passion burning hot? And is my pride subdued?"

CREDO helped me to list where I've succeeded and where I've failed. I'll spare you the accounting, but I'll tell you that I look at things differently since that week in Kansas City, and I see the church in a fresh light as well.

I wonder...

- Are we, the fellowship formed as the Body of Christ, all that we set out to be?
 - Is our calling sure?
 - Is our vision clear?
 - Is our passion burning hot?
 - And is our pride subdued?
-
- Did you have hopes and dreams for the church or for us that have to yet come to fruition? If so, why not?
 - Are we as a faith family more or less than you had hoped for?
 - Have you been surprised or disappointed by First & Central?
 - Have you become the church member that you envisioned?
 - Are your calling and vision sure and clear? Is your passion hot and is your pride subdued?

CREDO was a deep and powerful experience that led me to think that...

- Maybe issues of polity have clouded our eyes so that we no longer see the hungry, the naked and the sick.
- Maybe we're so concerned about protecting what is ours that we forget that we're only rich when we give it all away.
- Maybe we're so concerned about the purity of the church and keeping certain folks and their partners outside these doors that we forget that one day someone opened them for us.
- Maybe we're so concerned about making the church yield to our way of thinking that we've lost any way of loving.
- Maybe we've simply forgotten whose church it is after all.

Or maybe not.

We won't know unless we stop long enough to ask God what it is we should do with our lives, with this church, and with this denomination. A rare opportunity to spend a generous week in examination and scrutiny renewed my energy and focused my direction. It exposed areas needing work, aspects to let go of, and hopefully some resources untouched.

Prophets like Amos served to press the political and religious power structures of their day to examine and scrutinize policy and practice – particularly as it pertained to those on the lowest rungs. Isn't it time to take stock of ourselves and our lives as the body of Christ? We may not like what we discover, but surely God will be pleased that we took the time to ask.

One last thought about our young friend Kevin. Before the sun sets on you this day and every day, be sure that the people you love—your parents, your children, your spouse, your partner, your friends—even your enemies—be sure they know that you love them. A little boy's life ended so quickly and without warning really before anyone realized what was happening – yet he knew, more than anything else that he could be certain of in his short years, that he was cherished and loved.

Amen.