



This Is Real Life

TEXT
Amos 5:21–24

September 15, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

One of my favorite moments in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is when Marie returns from Sunday worship to tell her cousin Ophelia how wonderful worship was. “O, Dr. G ... preached a splendid sermon,” said Marie. “It was just such a sermon as you ought to hear; it expressed all my views exactly.”¹

Don’t you wish you could hear a sermon like that ... a sermon that expressed all your views exactly? I can’t even hear a sermon like that, and I’m doing the preaching. The problem is that when a sermon really proclaims the gospel, the word is not our own. The word is too big to be our own.

When Jesus says forgive seventy times seven, and I know how hard it is to let some things go ...

When Jesus says peacemakers are called God’s children, and I am too proud to make peace ...

When Jesus says sell all you have and give to the poor, and I am so anxious about running out ...

When Jesus says welcome the stranger, but my confidence

in the goodness of the stranger is low ...

I realize the gospel it is not an “expression of all my views exactly.” Here’s what I struggle with — and maybe you do too: How do we carry faith into the circumstances of my life? How do we make these caring but demanding teachings of Christ integrate with real life?

Well, prophets almost never expressed our views exactly. We said last week, the prophets had the ability to see the truth of the present, to see life as God sees life, and then to describe what God sees. As a result, the prophets challenge us.

And one of the challenges is that the prophets were never casual about worship. You heard the passage. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... I will not accept your offerings. ... Your songs are just noise to me.”

Wow! To be clear, these festivals and assemblies are worship. The noisy songs are hymns. God is basically saying, “I hate your worship.”

One of my mentors is a preacher named Jim Lowry. He’s a South Carolina storyteller and a wise pastor. He’s retired now. Jim said to me one

time, “Now Tom, you know the Lord is busy, but with everything else God has to do on Sunday, God’s still gonna drop by to hear what you have to say.” I haven’t been able to eat breakfast on Sunday since Jim said that to me. It’s intimidating. About the only thing worse than the idea of God being here to listen to us is to think God doesn’t want to be here.

It’s good to remember that worship is for God. Now, saying that, I hope that worship is meaningful for you. I hope that the repeated and regular discipline of coming into the presence of the living God means something in your own life. We all need that. But ultimately, worship is not just for us, but primarily it is for God. If you were to think about it, God is the one who receives our worship and praise. And if God chooses not to come, it is pointless.

I told the children a couple of weeks ago that when I was a kid, I was taken to church in a harness. I didn’t want to go. My parents made me go. The fact that I didn’t want to go didn’t matter to my parents at all. My parents never had the thought: I don’t want to force it on him; I want him to choose. No, they

treated Jesus like they treated lima beans and math homework and flossing. They were all just “givens” in our house; you were going to do them.

I say this because it’s important to notice that the problem was not that folks didn’t go to church. That’s our challenge. Today we are so busy, our schedules are so crowded, that for many of us it’s hard to make worship a priority. We are running from dark to dark and are often exhausted.

But for Amos, the problem wasn’t getting to worship. Church attendance was great. There was something else lacking. But what?

If I understand the text, the problem is that worship was siloed from the rest of life. Amos says, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Worship was not intended to be an experience that stays in the church. Worship was supposed to be the place where the story of life was rehearsed; the purpose of life was retold. It is to be the place where we remember who we are and what we are for. But that truth is not rehearsed in worship so that we simply know it; it is so that we might live it.

Several years ago, there was a series of commercials launched about Las Vegas. It presents Las Vegas as an adult playground where — how do we say? — the less honorable features of folks emerge. It suggests that in Las Vegas you might engage in behavior that

you might not want folks back home to know about. But not to worry, as the commercials promise, “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

So, I wonder if Amos is saying, if what happens in church stays in church, we have a problem. The truth is, when the benediction is pronounced, it has always been easy to leave the affirmations of our faith in the sanctuary.

Rev. Benjamin Palmer, in the 1860s, was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. Regarding the issue of the day, Palmer justified slavery this way. He said, *The principle of self-preservation, that “first law” which is continually asserting its supremacy over others. Need I pause to show how this system of servitude underlies and supports our material interests? That our wealth consists in our lands, and in the serfs who till them?*

We can’t set these people free; the economy couldn’t handle it. I know where he got that idea, but it wasn’t in church. He left the gospel in the sanctuary.

The front page of the paper yesterday speaks again of abuse by priests, another dramatic example of leaving the gospel behind.

Now, I only lift up a moment from the past because the error is clear from our day. I only lift up a dramatic moment from the news because the error is clear. But the focus of this sanctuary is, what is God expecting of us when God says let justice roll down and

righteousness flow like a river? Sometimes, in less dramatic ways, we all struggle for there to be integrity between what is proclaimed in the worship of God and what is lived in the world.

Several years ago, I was at breakfast with a friend from Village. We became friends soon after we moved to town because my friend was active here at Village. He served as an officer. He was faithful in worship, but then, rather abruptly, he just stopped coming. It took me some time to notice that I hadn’t seen my friend in a while.

So, I invited him to breakfast. At breakfast, I said, “Tell me why you are away. What happened?” I didn’t know if he had had a change at work, or was facing an illness, or if I or the church had disappointed him in some way.

He said, “Tom, I realized that what we talked about in church was so far removed from my life at work, it was like I was living in two different worlds. Faith just didn’t seem to connect with real life. I thought, what’s the point?”

I think that is what Amos is talking about. What concerns God is when we can’t connect faith with real life. And it raises the question of what do we think real life is?

This afternoon, I’m going to watch some football, or football will be on the TV while I nap. Football is a rough game — hard-hitting. It’s dangerous. But it’s allowed as long as you are on the field. But if you

step off the field, you can't hit people like that because football is a game; it's not real life.

Here's my point. When we think that the truth proclaimed in here is a ball field, and the way of life assumed out there is real life, we may have things backward. I submit that worship is real life, and when we step away from what is proclaimed in our faith, we are becoming less than we were created to be.

I'm going in for my physical next month. I'm going to go, but I know what he's going to tell me. Exercise more and eat better. Sleep more than I do and reduce my stress. I know that's what he's going to say, and maybe it will bring reform, but it hasn't always.

He says these things, and I tell him my dilemma. I'm a busy guy. I do the best I can, but the truth is all that healthy living just doesn't fit into real life. But here's the thing: What he is telling me, that is real life. I can live a different way, but I can't make a different way healthy. I don't get to change that. It's a given.

I am grateful for this hard word from Amos because I know he's right. In our day when schedules are the way they are and demands stacked up as they are, it's hard to make the worship of God a priority. But I know we need to rehearse again and again who we are and what we are for. We can't be shaped by the life of Christ unless we *know* the life of Christ.

When Jesus says forgive seventy times seven, we know

how hard it is to let some things go. It's hard, but we also know he is right. There is no life in vengeance.

When Jesus says peacemakers are called God's children, and I am too proud to make peace ... but we know he's right ... we can't fight forever.

When Jesus says sell all you have and give to the poor, and I am so anxious about running out ... but we also know the joy of sacrificing for the good of the community.

When Jesus says, welcome the stranger, but our confidence in the goodness of the stranger is low ... and yet, we know he is right, because they too are God's children.

This gospel, it is not an expression of all my views exactly.

I don't know when it will happen this week ... but you will have a moment. You will have a circumstance in which you will need to decide if grace can be trusted; if love can be chosen; if forgiveness can be offered; if justice can be pursued. Maybe it will be an easy choice, but often it's not.

So remember who you are — you are God's child — and what you are for — you are to live as God's child. Remember this, for that's when life gets real.

¹Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Barnes and Noble Ed: 1995), p. 182

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.