

“Seeking Justice”
Amos 8:4-7

Pastor Liz Miller
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This might be the most unlikely way to begin a sermon on Just Peace Sunday, but I promise it ties in. This month is the 25th anniversary of the premiere of the tv show Friends and I have been inundated with Friends references the past few weeks, so much so that I can't get certain scenes out of my head. Commercials, social media, and even google doodles have paid homage to the sitcom that hasn't really aged well but still looms large in pop culture history, thanks in part to reruns still airing almost daily.

One of the most iconic scenes in the sitcom's history is when Ross is trying to move a new couch upstairs into his apartment with the help of his friends Rachel and Chandler. The stairwell twists and turns in ways that the oversized couch does not. The scene is memorable because of a single word Ross shouts as he gives his friends instructions, “PIVOT! PIVOT!” The couch quickly becomes wedged in the stairwell no matter how many times Ross tells them to pivot. The show ends with Ross attempting to return the couch to the store for a refund, with him carefully dodging questions from the sale's person about how the couch came to be cut in half.

This scene has lived in infamy because we are a pivot people - how many of us have tried to put something that is much too large in a space smaller than it was meant to fit? How many of us have said yes to helping someone even though we knew the task they asked us to do was impossible? How many of us have encountered a large problem and thought, if we just pivot an inch or two, everything will come together and work out? How many of us have done this and struggled, alone or with friends, until we finally give in and realize we have to start all over with

something new? Or grown so frustrated we leave the obstacle in its place and walk away without a solution? We are conditioned to look for the easiest solution, to do the least amount possible to get the results we want, and in doing so we become pivot people - trying to make something we want to change an inch at a time instead of realizing something entirely different is needed.

While most of us have been conditioned to seek the easy solutions or go about change in incremental steps, occasionally there are voices that cry out for something more. Instead of shouting at us to pivot an inch or two, they shout out for us to completely transform - to turn fully away from the behaviors or situations that are causing grief and to try something brand new. These are the people we call our prophets - our voices in the wilderness - our visionary thinkers and bold truth tellers calling us to stop pivoting and to make a radical change.

Amos, from whom our scripture reading today came from, was one of those prophets, warning his people to turn away from corrupt and oppressive forces that governed their land. In the verses we read he condemns the people in power, business owners, to stop their unethical treatment of the poor and to stop living with making money as their ultimate value. “To make the ephah small” meant using an undersized container to measure grain, and to “make the shekel great” meant using an overly heavy stone to weigh payment, therefore taking more than was charged. Selling the sweepings of the wheat meant diluting the wheat with the chaff, or the leftovers, that were worthless. Amos called them out for cheating and robbing people three different ways, and for making their targets the most poor among them who would not have had the resources to fight back.

Amos evokes God’s anger, warning them of misfortune to come if they continue in their unjust practices. We shirk away from God being angry, but this interpretation of God was Amos’ interpretation of justice. It was less about a powerful being in the sky throwing thunderbolts or

causing storms, and more about warning of the calamity and chaos that follows when a society turns to corruption and oppression as its standard for living instead of seeking justice and caring for one another.

Amos is not asking God's people to pivot a little bit, or saying, "if you're going to cheat people with a great shekel, at least make the ephah right sized." He is calling all of their behaviors out and warning them that *any* kind of corruption leads to suffering and injustice. He is telling them they can't compromise their values **and** expect to be called great people or have great things happen to them.

Amos was part of a tradition of prophets that called for total change and reconciliation of past harm done, speaking to people that kind of listened, or took their suggestions under advisement. These prophets spoke to people who might say, "Of course they are right, but what can we do about it?" The people said, "We're torn up about the situation, but it's more complicated than the prophet understands. There are good people on both sides." We allow these prophets to call out the truth, and often we even encourage them, but when was the last time we said, "You know what? They are right. I'm going to completely change. I'm going all in for justice no matter how much it requires of me."

Those prophetic voices continue to speak loudly today, the most recent being Greta Thunberg. A year ago, as a 15 year old Swedish student, she began leaving school to protest at the Swedish parliament, urging them to take stronger climate action. Thus began a student movement called Fridays for Future that has taken root across the globe. Her voice became so loud that last week she was invited to the United States to address congress. In her speech to our Congress, she said,

"Wherever I go I seem to be surrounded by fairytales. Business leaders, elected officials all across the political spectrum spending their time making up and telling bedtime stories

that soothe us, that make us go back to sleep. These are “feel-good” stories about how we are going to fix everything. How wonderful everything is going to be when we have “solved” everything. But the problem we are facing is not that we lack the ability to dream, or to imagine a better world. The problem now is that we need to wake up. It’s time to face the reality, the facts, the science. And the science doesn’t mainly speak of ‘great opportunities to create the society we always wanted.’ It tells of unspoken human sufferings, which will get worse and worse the longer we delay action – unless we start to act now. And yes, of course a sustainable transformed world will include lots of new benefits. But you have to understand. This is not primarily an opportunity to create new green jobs, new businesses or green economic growth. This is above all an emergency, and not just any emergency. This is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.”

That was Wednesday. On Friday over 4 million people joined protests in support of her movement for climate action. When Saturday morning came, how many of us woke up and made a significant change in our daily actions to positively support climate action? Greta is calling on all of us, and especially those of us in wealthy countries who are using the majority of natural resources, to stop pivoting and to start over in how we deal with the climate crisis. This means personal action and changes in our lives, and it means holding the corporations who are the largest polluters to task and demanding they make significant changes.

Whenever there is an injustice in our world, voices rise up with clear directives about how we are to respond. If we want to learn how to end gun violence, we should listen to the students from Parkland, Florida. One of their gun control activist leaders, Delaney Torr, said last month after the mass shooting in Texas, “It almost feels like we keep shouting into this nothingness because nobody is listening.”

It’s true. Lawmakers hear them and they think if they concede on one small point or pass micro-legislation that will silence the prophets and convince us all that change is coming. Instead

of leaning into our resilience and demanding better of ourselves and for our neighbors, we applaud the pivots and silence the dissenters until the next wave of tragedy or oppression or crisis washes over us.

Justice will come when we **all** raise our voices and upend our lives to commit to big change. To commit ourselves fully and completely to the work of making a just world. What would it look like if each one of us took the issue that most concerned panicked us and committed our lives to it? What if everyone who knew us knew what we stood for, unapologetically, uncompromising, fully focused on justice? What would it be like to echo the prophets and heed their messages, making them feel like after thousands of years the people were finally listening? What would it look like if as a church community we did this? If we took on the big issues in big ways, together as one people and one voice?

Last Saturday 25 Edgewood leaders spent the day together with Austin Channing Brown, the author of “I’m Still Here: Black Dignity In a World Made For Whiteness” and an anti-racism facilitator for faith based organizations. Throughout the day she led us to create a vision for what it would mean for Edgewood to say, “We are an anti-racist church” and what it will take to get there. Channing Brown told us that almost every church begins their anti-racism commitment with hospitality and welcome, especially on Sunday morning. And these changes feel really good, so when they happen, the church thinks their work is done.

She said that this was actually the beginning of change, and that there were at least six steps, each one requiring the church to discern and change, beyond hospitality and welcome in order to live into their vision of racial justice. She said that in order for racial justice to really take root, every church policy, tradition, practice, norm, committee, team, building room, and piece of art needed to be looked at. There could be no stone unturned and no difficult

conversation placed on mute. It all had to be dealt with if a church as truly going to embody racial justice because the issue is that big, the history of racism and segregation in churches is that long, and the stakes for reconciliation are that high.

When Channing Brown led us through this process, three things became clear to me: 1. It is **a lot** of work. 2. It is work that if done faithfully and thoroughly, could be energizing and transformative. 3. It is up to all of us here at Edgewood to do the work. She was with us one day and gave us a roadmap, but like other prophetic voices - there is only so much she can say and warn us of before it is up to us to listen, commit, and begin the work of change.

That workshop was well-timed to be a week before we recommitted ourselves today as a Just Peace church. This is a core of our vision and purpose as a faith community, as God's people united in our discipleship in this little corner of the world. We have heard the voices of the prophets calling us away from evil and back toward God's justice. Away from corruption and back toward compassion. Away from pivoting and back toward significant change. My prayer for us, this day and every day, is that we will embody the vision of the prophets and commit our full lives to seeking that justice and working for change.