Seventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Speaking Truth to Power"
Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29
July 10-11, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Knowing when an avocado is perfectly ripe (not too hard, not too soft) is an art. Raise your hand if you have ever cut into an avocado that you **thought** was ripe, but wasn't. If you're like me, you hoped against hope that the cut avocado would ripen with time. You left it out – or put it in the fridge – and saw it blacken, not soften, with time. Such a disappointment! Same with cut peaches, in my experience. There's no going back once the knife has sliced them.

There **is** another kind of fruit, though, that ripens more quickly when cut: the wild fig. 'None of those around here, as far as I know, but plenty of them in the Middle East: in Egypt and Israel, for example. In this weekend's first lesson Amos says to Amaziah, a royal prophet who tells him to prophesy elsewhere, *"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees."* (Amos 7:14) Amos is not talking about our North American sycamore, but a wild fig tree. The fruit isn't lovely like the fresh figs we know from cultivated trees. It is a little bitter, but beggars can't be choosers and it is a food source for the poor. To "dress" those trees means to slash the fruit to make it ripen faster. (Gouging also helps prevent wasps from infesting the fruit, though I don't know why.)

This fellow Amos, who has a book of the Bible named after him, tended a flock of some kind and harvested wild fruit, eaten by people hungry for anything. He dealt with the poor. He had a heart for the poor. So small wonder that the Lord chose him to deliver a

message of judgment to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, an indictment for its mistreatment of the poor.

When I tell you that all of this was happening in the middle of the 8th century B.C., around 760-750 B.C., you may be tempted to think, "Then this has nothing to do with us!" But don't be too quick on the draw. Human behavior doesn't really change that much over time, and the temptation to hoard wealth and to ignore the poor is a perennial one. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was at the height of its geographic size and economic power in the 8th century B.C. In the midst of all that prosperity, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Amos was the first of the classical prophets to voice the Lord's anger over practices that may have been legal but were immoral anyway. Big landowners could squeeze tiny landowners out of their ancestral land because of delayed payment on miniscule loans. Robbed of their land and means of making a living, families were consigned to poverty, generation after generation.

Earlier in the Book of Amos, we read of God's explicit statement that worship is empty unless we honor God, love our neighbor and live out our faith during the week. Here's how the Lord spoke to God's people through Amos:

> *I hate, I despise your festivals,*
> *and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*
> *Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings,*
> *I will not accept them…*
> *Take away from me the noise of your songs;*
> *I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*
> *But let justice roll down like waters,*
> *and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:21-24)

In some ways the Old Testament prophets were like Cassandra from Greek mythology: condemned to be the bearer of bad news that people didn't want to hear and refused to believe. Prophets didn't pop up to pat people on the back. They were either

afflicting the comfortable, like Amos, or comforting the afflicted, like Isaiah who spoke God's word of hope about a promised return from exile to the Jews in exile in Babylon. Amos' expression of God's disgust in the people of Israel preceded the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. The Assyrians invaded and carried many of the people off into captivity. Most of them never returned: hence the ten lost tribes of Israel. Through the eyes of faith, this wasn't some random political/military exercise: it was God's judgment on the nation's disregard of the poor and individuals' lack of attention to the essentials: loving God above all else and neighbor as self. The lesson there is relevant in every age and on every continent.

It's dicey speaking truth to power, dangerous criticizing institutions, which tend to have more clout than individuals. John the Baptist spoke truth to power in his condemnation of Herod and his wife Herodias. His head ended up on a platter. Thomas More spoke truth to power in his refusal to sign on to Henry VIII's divorce of Catherine of Aragon. His head ended up on a spike. The ability to end one's life peacefully in bed is not guaranteed to the Lord's beloved. What is guaranteed is God's pleasure at our leading a life devoted to justice and marked by righteousness.

A week from this Saturday, July 17, we remember another holy one who spoke truth to power: Bartolomé de las Casas, missionary and "apostle" to the Indies, who died in 1566. A Spanish lawyer, Bartolomé came to the New World (Cuba) as part of a colonizing expedition. In partial payment of his services, he was granted land, including "ownership" of the indigenous people who lived on it. He came to be so disgusted by the inhumane treatment of those fellow children of God that he returned to Europe and studied for the priesthood. Upon ordination he returned all his serfs to the Governor, the closest he could

come to freeing them. Bartolomé waited to celebrate his first Mass until he could return to Hispaniola, the island that encompasses both the Dominican Republic and Haiti (so prominent in the news this past week). He spent the rest of his life working toward more just treatment of the indigenous peoples and the abolition of slavery in the New World. He succeeded in lobbying for some just laws that were then basically ignored in practice, including the prohibition of slavery and the humanizing of colonization. He wrote, "I leave in the Indies Jesus Christ, our God, scourged and afflicted and beaten and crucified not once, but thousands of times."[1] Like Amos, John the Baptist, and Thomas More, Bartolomé de las Casas was not a popular guy. He was messing with other people's source of income and impugning their character, and he received multiple death threats. He was challenging the lucrative institution of slavery and questioning the quality of Christianity of slaveholders. "Who was he to say such things??" Like Amos and all the other prophets, he was a spokesperson for the God who has a preferential option for the poor, who favors the have-nots over the haves, and who calls all God's people to recognize in every human being the *imago Dei*, the image of God, and to treat that person accordingly, regardless of color, creed, immigration status, or place of national origin. Amen

[1]Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 307.

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