

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 1st 2016

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13)

The sun rises. Another day embarks with household tasks followed by the trek to the field, school, factory, office, or shop. When harvest or wages arrive, bills are paid and the market is scoured for the stuff of life. Tomorrow the pattern repeats. Some days are for rest or worship or celebration. But mainly, to live is to labor. For many people, “retirement” and “vacation” are words spoken in a foreign tongue.

Amos knew the burden and uncertainties of securing a living. He knew the pride of work well done. As a shepherd, Amos learned the dignity of labor. From his craft, he saw how animals and persons can be fleeced. His poetry thunders against wage theft, rigged scales, and systems that serve the rich and squeeze the poor. The great divide between haves and have-nots will throw the earth into darkness. In this vision, material injustice creates a spiritual crisis which money alone can never resolve. “One does not live by bread alone...” Like other prophets, Amos was derided and later expelled by the priests of Bethel.

To cultivate a passion for justice we must learn to see the world. At first that sounds easy: all of life shows up on the internet. But how are connections made? When we visit a factory, follow farmworkers into the fields, listen to workers on a picket line, encounter folks shorn by payday lenders, we learn to see. Amos would gasp at the thousands of container ships crossing the seas each day that bring shoes to my feet and food to my fridge. Phony weights are easier to grasp than global markets. But comprehending the complexity that is capitalism is not enough. Like Amos, we must place ourselves on the side of the poor and act.

Justice and mercy belong together. Mercy connects us to persons on both sides of the divide. Each one matters. We are more than our pay scale or stock option. No group has a monopoly on sin. No one is unredeemed. Without mercy, the passion for justice can consume us. Without striving for justice, mercy grows complacent. God’s mercy tells us that we have already arrived. God’s justice says to make straight a path in the wilderness that is history and to build this road together.

Jeanne Schuler-Creighton University's Philosophy Department