

A group of us spent a few days in Port Townsend last week at a church conference and on the ferry on the way back, we were talking about news reports of the heavy taxation on the poorest of the poor in India and how hard it is to believe that kind of thing can happen when we live in such a bubble of comfort. We're so removed from so much of the suffering in the world.

Not only are we removed from the suffering in the world, we are removed from one another. We have become so politically polarized that we've lost our ability to discuss and find solutions to the very problems that threaten our survival. Big multifactorial issues are reduced to one side against the other side without regard for the complexity, nuance and variability that is inherent in human society.

This is why the cries of the prophets are more relevant now than ever. They remind us what to pay attention to. They put their fingers on the pulse of what matters most and they burst the bubbles that so often separate us from what is most important.

And when they speak, there is always fierce resistance.

But there is also incredible potential for change.

What Amos has to say is relevant both to our gospel reading today and to us as Americans in the 21st century, because it speaks to the difficulty of faithful living that accompanies prosperity, of living in our bubbles.

Societies that thrive economically find that it is easy to forget God's commandment to care for the poor and the needy. Problems like homelessness and income disparity, oppressive laws and taxation are not new problems. They've always been with us. Some societies have made significant progress. But we're not there yet.

Amos was a prophet from the Southern Kingdom sent by God to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom so he was an outsider. He was team red going to call out team blue or vice versa.

At the time, the Northern Kingdom had successfully repelled the Aramaeans. Trade was flowing and things were going well, however, the prosperity of some came at the expense of others. The king maintained law and order, but the protection of the law was skewed toward the rich and powerful.

In those days, if you were rich it was assumed that you were blessed by God. Not like today. Today we assume the rich and powerful have made their own way through hard work, determination and brains. We are self made.

But back then, if people were successful, they assumed God was rewarding them with prosperity. So at the time, worship attendance, especially by the rich and powerful at the king's houses of worship was high. Enter Amos, the outsider from the wrong side of the kingdom.

Amos went directly to the king's church at Bethel and challenged them, he told the people they needed to reverse their oppression of the poor, he called out their corruption of the system of justice.

The city "gate" was the area just inside the main entrance to the walled city. It was a public gathering place for all kinds of hearings and disputes. And they were decided by interpreting the Torah.

What happened "in the gate" was important because it was the key public arena for negotiating fairness, compassion, and social order according to God's holy law.

The Torah reminded Israel that God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow," and "loves the strangers." Israel was commanded to be a mirror of God's justice in its own life and social relationships, and so are we, now, today.

What Amos saw at the gate was a law that was being used as a weapon to destroy the lives of the poor while the rich ignored the harm being done and justified the abuse as consistent with the law.

But they didn't see it that way. Which is why we tell the story, and retell the story, because it's hard to see clearly when we're comfortably in our bubbles.

The intent of the law was to ensure for the wellbeing for the whole community, The kingdom of God or eternal life is code for the wellbeing of the entire world. Not necessarily in the future, but also now, here on earth.

So what must we do to bring this kind of justice to the world's poor and oppressed? To bring the kingdom of God, eternal life for all?

For the past two weeks our readings have examined the question of what is needed to inherit eternal life. What do we have to do to live in the kingdom of God, to live the way God wants us to live.

Apparently it's not as easy as simply following the law, Jesus asks for much more... to sell everything and give it to the poor, to approach the kingdom of God with the vulnerability of a little child.

The poor and children are the least powerful, the most vulnerable among us, and their lives depend on the kindness and generosity of others. So it seems in order to inherit eternal life, we need to make ourselves vulnerable and maybe even experience poverty ourselves.

Have you ever thought about the fact that God could have come into the world in many different forms? Why didn't God choose to come as someone with enormous political power, with access to the world's leaders and power brokers? I think it's a worthy question to ponder.

As you know that's not what happened. When God came into the world, God chose the form of a poor child. Galilee was the poorest area in Israel. When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple for his presentation, they brought a sacrifice that only the poorest of the poor would bring.

Jesus grew up poor, Jesus was poor. Is that the way we think of Jesus?

The most powerful, the creator of everything, took the form of the least powerful and lived as the least powerful. Jesus knew poverty first hand.

There was a custom in Palestine at that time that when, a wealthy person would throw a party they invited guests and then set up a long table in the courtyard full of the best food and wine.

When the guests arrived, if a poor person could slip in the door with the invited guests, maybe a prostitute or a homeless person, the host was obligated to feed them, not obligated to let them eat at the table with the invited guests, but to feed them and send them on their way. They were called the *hombre*, the shadow people.

Jesus as a poor person was an hombre a shadow person. He knew what it was like to experience living on the outside, living with rejection, hunger and oppression.

So when he tells us to preference the poor, the weak and the outsider, he speaks from the side of the poor, and he suggests that to realize the kingdom, to bring the rule of God's kingdom to our hurting world, we too need to know what it is to be poor, to be vulnerable.

So often we see our role as the helpers of the poor, Jesus suggests the poor and vulnerable have an experience of God that the wealthy need.

This week as I was preparing this sermon, I wondered what the world would be like if the rich sat down and talked with the poor as often as they talked about how to fix the lives of the poor.

The journey of discipleship is intended to turn us upside down. The way of the cross is always an invitation to open our hearts and minds to new ways of thinking and being. Sometimes that means entering into places where we feel uncomfortable, of taking a position of openness, of crossing the boundaries of polarities.

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Right alongside that incredible promise of abundance is that little pesky part about “persecutions.”

Why is that part of the promise? Maybe because painful, challenging experiences promote growth. Maybe hearing what we don't want to hear, what goes against what we've always thought and known is part of the way we're asked to follow.

It's curious to me that I've always focused on the part about giving all the stuff away. It's a radical challenge and it makes me uncomfortable. I've always assumed the rich young man goes away grieving because he doesn't want to give up what he has...but maybe his grief is about the loss he will experience when he does give up his possessions.

When Jesus gives this command to the rich young man he does it with love, because he knows that the material things that separate us from one another are like chains of oppression that we are enslaved to, they are barriers that keep us wrapped up in our secure little bubbles. Jesus wants our liberation out of love for us.

What the rich young man is asked to do seems nearly impossible. The magnitude of what he is asked to do is overwhelming. He comes to Jesus alone, and he leaves Jesus alone and grieving but Jesus offers the true treasure when he tells his disciples:

“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

The reality is that entering the kingdom of heaven without God isn't possible. We are not alone in the work of “thy kingdom come.” No matter who we are, we are invited to make radical, seemingly impossible change in partnership with one another and with God.

Jesus never says, you can come in if you earn it, or you can't come in because you did something that disqualifies you, he says we are all welcome, but none of us can enter life fully without God...because following God's law is relational, love God, love your neighbor, God loves you.

That is a promise that energizes us to follow the way of Jesus Christ in ways that both challenge, and give us hope and faith in a God who works alongside us to re-establish justice in the gate, no matter how impossible it may seem.