

# When the Truth is Hard to Hear

Amos 5:6-7; 10-15; Mark 10:17-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I very often listen to music while I write.

On Friday morning, while I was hunting around Apple Music for an appropriate sermon-prep soundtrack, I came across a new album by an aging Christian pop star who was popular when I was a teenager.

I clicked. I listened. I'm a bit of a sucker. It was pretty average.

But what caught my attention was how iTunes categorized this artist. We are familiar with the usual words we use to classify music: "Pop," "rock," "classical," "country," "jazz" "blues," "folk." They are words that allow us to put music in its proper place—words that help us to know what to listen to and what to avoid.

In the case of my aging Christian pop star, the category was "inspirational."

That's an interesting designation. As far as I can tell, it's applied mainly to music that is *Christian*.

I think that there is much that *is* inspirational about Christianity.

I think the Christian message of unearned grace and forgiveness is inspirational. I think that the good news of reconciliation with God and neighbour and creation is inspirational. I think the call to be peacemakers in a world addicted to violence is inspirational.

I think that the beauty and of creation and the creativity of God is inspirational. I think the hope of eternity is inspirational.

Most importantly, I think that *Jesus* is inspiring. I think that his living embodiment of the core of the Christian message—that *God is love*—is incredibly inspirational.

But I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that "inspirational" wasn't the first word that popped to mind as you heard our two passages this morning.

Maybe other words occurred to you. Words like "bewildering" or "unsettling," say.

Or maybe it wasn't words that came to mind at all, but just a sigh of resignation. What to do with these angry prophets who just go on and on and *on* about judgment? What to do with Jesus' most impossible sounding words?

I had these reactions when I read the texts for this week (pastors aren't supposed to admit that, are they?!).

I didn't think they were inspirational. I thought they were hard.

Hard to hear. *The Lord will sweep through the house of Joseph like a devouring and unquenchable fire?!*

Hard to properly contextualize. Hard to explain away (because the most natural thing to do when we hear hard words in the bible is to try to explain them away).

And hard to do! I am not, as it happens, anxious to sell everything I own and give it away! Perhaps you aren't either.

What do we do when the Bible isn't very inspirational? What do we do when *Jesus* isn't very inspirational?

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Well, we pay attention. Or at least we try!

So, let's try.

The title of my sermon this morning is "When the Truth is Hard to Hear." And in our two passages this morning we encounter prophets delivering hard truths to people who don't want to hear them.

In our first reading, we encounter prophet Amos, a shepherd from the north who has some unpleasant things to say to Kingdom of Judah.

The whole book reads like an extended harangue against his people for a litany of sins that keep on showing up throughout the prophetic literature: idolatry, injustice, neglect of the poor, entitlement, taking bribes.

Keep this up, Amos says, “And you will be ruined. You will be conquered and destroyed and sent off into exile.

He tells them what they don’t want to hear. And, they mostly ignore him.

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth (v. 10).

Amos speaks the truth, even though the truth is not welcome, not convenient, and not pleasant. In Luke 4:24 Jesus famously said that a prophet was never accepted in his hometown, and Amos certainly wasn’t.

But everything that Amos predicted came to pass. Around forty years after his death the Assyrian army would invade the Northern Kingdom, destroy its cities, and carry the people into exile.

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Around eight centuries later, another prophet speaks an inconvenient truth.

This time, it’s not to a nation, it’s to a single person.

A man comes to Jesus with a question. It’s an urgent question. The man runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees. This is no matter of idle curiosity. There is an air of desperation to the encounter.

The question is the biggest one of them all, one that all of us have asked, in some form or another, at various points in our lives: *What must I do to inherit eternal life.*

Jesus responds, as he often does. A bit unpredictably. A bit enigmatically (*Why do you call me good?*).

And always with an eye to getting at the question *behind* the question.

He does this in a very interesting way. He points him back to the Jewish law, to the Ten Commandments.

It’s not the only time he does this. We might also think of Luke 10 when Jesus is faced with the same question from a lawyer. There, too, he begins by pointing to the heart of the law—love God, love your neighbour. When pressed further, he tells the uncomfortable story of the Good Samaritan!

Here, too, he points the man right back to the Jewish law.

*You know the commandments...*

But it's interesting to note which of the commandments Jesus mentions.

Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother.

He focuses on the commandments that deal with how we are to relate to our fellow human beings, but he leaves aside the first four commandments which deal primarily with the question of right-relationship to God (I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other Gods before me... no graven images... don't take the name of the Lord in vain).

We'll come back to that.

The man responds, "I've done all these things since I was a child." *I've played by the rules.*

And then Jesus exposes the question behind the question.

**One thing you lack. Go sell what you own and give the money to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.**

At this, the man famously goes away grieving. *For he had many possessions.*

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Jesus says a lot of hard things in his encounters with people in the gospels. But this surely represents some of his hardest teaching.

*Go and sell everything you have...*

*It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.*

We hear these words and we squirm. And if we don't, we probably should.

By almost any global calculus, we are rich. One billion people on this planet live on less than \$1.25 a day. Almost half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day.

If you have food on the table and a roof over your head, you are rich—probably within the top 10% of the planet when it comes to wealth.

We can try to say that the man in the story represents a different category of wealth. But if we are honest, it is virtually impossible for us to locate ourselves anywhere in this story but in the figure of the man asking the question.

So, what do we do with this hard story that Jesus tells?

Is Jesus anti-possessions? Does he expect all of his followers to be destitute?

I don't think so.

I think that if we pay attention to the way this conversation unfolds, we see in telling this man to sell everything and follow him Jesus was bringing things right back to the commandments that he *didn't* mention earlier.

*Ok, you say you've kept all the commandments since you were a boy? Well, let's see about that. There were a few commandments I didn't mention—commandments that I know that you know, too... Commandments about having no other gods before me. Let's test your theory that you've kept **all** the commandments. Sell what you have and follow me.*

Jesus' response to this man is an expose of this man's devotion to his wealth, to his placing his possessions in the place that God alone is worthy of.

It is a response to the idolatry of stuff that comes so naturally to us as human beings.

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The man went away sad, our text says. The text doesn't *explicitly* say why, although it seems that it was because he wasn't willing to part with his stuff.

This is the most natural interpretation. And it's natural because I think most of us can see ourselves in his sadness, at least on some level.

Why?

What is it about stuff that makes it such an alluring idol? What is that our stuff gives us (or what is that we *imagine* our stuff gives us)?

Jesus says that it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Why?

Well, there are many things that we think our stuff gives us.

Security.

Identity.

Status.

Meaning.

Fulfillment.

Happiness.

I've thought of each of these things as I've read this text over the years. This year, I added one more to the list of things that we imagine our stuff gets us: validation.

Perhaps one of the reasons the rich man went away sad was because Jesus' response threatened his understanding of the role he had played in *acquiring* all this stuff! He earned it, after all.

And how else do we keep score in life? How else do we know who's doing it right, who's blessed? Wealth is one of the easiest tools we have for evaluating these things, for measuring competence, for seeing who's "getting ahead" and who's "falling behind."

Jesus was putting this man on a level playing field with the poor to whom he was supposed to give his possessions; maybe the man had no interest in this kind of a leveling. Maybe he had no use for a world where last are first and first are last (maybe we don't either!).

Maybe one of the reasons the man in the parable trudged sadly off was because he was fond of his possessions, certainly, **but even fonder of the idea that he had earned them.**

Maybe, at the end of it all, that's the eye of the needle that the man struggled so mightily to walk through, the thing that prevented him (and us?) from entering the kingdom of God. The idea that he was the one earning what could only be received as a gift.

Ultimately, everything that matters can only be received as a gift.

Security in a world where we are fragile and vulnerable.

The grounding of our identity in the deeper realities of love, forgiveness, and the promise of salvation.

Our deepest need for meaning, fulfillment, and purpose.

The joy we were made for.

These, in the end, are not things that we can earn. They can only be received as gifts.

And this, perhaps, is why Jesus put things as strongly as he did in today's story.

Jesus isn't against possessions in and of themselves. He knows that we need stuff to survive and thrive in the world; he knows that stuff can be a source of pleasure, a celebration of the good things that God has made and has seen fit to give us.

Jesus *is* against all that would keep us away from the proper love, worship, and trust of God, against all that would place us on the throne of our own lives.

And when our *stuff* assumes the place of God and God's gifts? Well, then so much the worse for our stuff. It will have to go.

We will have to be taught to unclench hands that are constantly tempted to close around the things that we think will save us, and to open them to God and others.

For our own sake.

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I need to end with one final, vitally important truth.

All of God's commands, all the hard words of Christ, are rooted in love.

Did you notice that part in the story this morning? After this man says that he's kept all the commandments, after he's done his best to demonstrate to Jesus that he's been a good boy that's played by the rules, what does it say?

**Jesus looked at him and loved him.**

And he does the same for us. He looks at us and he loves us.

He loves us for the people we are and for the people we want to be. He loves us despite all of our failures and our mixed motives and misspent worship.

He looks at us. And he loves us. He loves us too much to leave us alone.

He knows that it might seem impossible to wean us from our lust for stuff, our chasing after idols that cannot save. But listen to what he says at the end.

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible (Mark 10:27).

All things are possible for God – even helping us to loosen our grip on our possessions and to open our hands.

Even shaping us into people of gratitude and proper worship, training us to be receivers of gifts rather than scorekeepers and performers of virtue.

Even turning us into people who are lovers of the truth, even when the truth is hard to hear.

The truth *is* hard to hear. Amos knew this. Jesus knew it even more deeply and truly. It ended up getting him killed.

But we are people who sometimes need to hear hard things. We are people who need the mirror that Scripture holds up to us, the mirror that *Jesus* holds up to us, and seek always to align our lives with the truth we see reflected back to us.

I want to close with a quote from another person who was killed for speaking hard truths to people who didn't want to hear it.

Oscar Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador. He sounded a lot like Amos, going on and on about injustice and greed and social inequality. He was assassinated for his efforts while presiding over the Mass in 1980.

In a ceremony earlier today, Romero was officially canonized. This is one of his most famous quotes:

A church that does not provoke crisis, a gospel that does not disturb, a word of God that does not rankle, a word of God that does not touch the concrete sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed — what kind of gospel is that? Just nice, pious considerations that bother nobody — that's the way many people would like our preaching to be.

And, to be honest, that's the way that many of us preachers would like to preach. Nice, pious considerations are easier. The truth is just as hard to speak as it is to hear sometimes!

Thank God for truth-tellers like Amos, like Oscar Romero. And most importantly, like Jesus.

May God help us to be appropriately disturbed and rankled by the one who loves us enough to never leave us alone.

Amen.

