

ALL THE ASSEMBLY KEPT SILENCE

Texts on Sunday, July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15 • Acts 15:6-12

In 2008, a fragment of a sermon by Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ got clipped into the news cycle for some days. To the shock and awe of millions, that preacher, who was pastor to the Obama family, was on an incessantly repeating video loop, saying "God damn America!" In the media *mêlée*, Obama's presidential run stumbled.

Now, Rev. Wright was preaching from the prophets that day. Was Amos his text, whom we just heard? Suppose it was. Suppose we substitute the word "America" where Amos named Israel, and suppose we insert our heroes' names for theirs of old. Hear what we would hear:

And the Lord said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of America; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Washington and Lee shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of America shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the White House with the sword."

Did Jeremiah Wright preach the word for the times? From the noise on the right, you wouldn't know it. But you could only deny Wright's righteous preaching by breaking the bones of the living Word to stuff it in the casket of the past, unmeaning for our time. The motive for killing the prophets that way would not differ from any in all the Bible—the motive of fear in the unforgiven to confess and repent our nation's grievous evils. Only those free in spirit and forgiven can hear every word of the prophets spoken in reproach of their land and people as reproach and warning to the people and leaders dominant in our land today. God damn Israel, said the prophets. And America?

The legislatures of Arkansas, Idaho, Louisiana and many more states are making it illegal for teachers—prophets—to promote "division between, resentment of, or social justice for" groups based on race, gender, or political affiliation.¹ The rich man after whom UNC's Hussman School of Journalism is named, was so troubled by Nikole Hannah-Jones' reporting on structural racism for the New York Times 1619 Project that he demanded university trustees deny Hannah-Jones a tenure track position. Which they did deny! Come prophesy for a season, then, O seer, get you gone. All these terrified white men have Amaziah for model mouthpiece, casting out Amos: "O seers, go! Fly away and never again prophesy here, for this is a temple of the kingdom."

Now, I do not believe it in the nature of God to destroy things or people for any reason whatsoever ever. The prophets got that wrong. But it is in the nature of things that greed unchecked leads to the destruction of everything, nations too. What the prophets got right is the inflexible force of the spiritual law that brings to naught every people who love dead things more than living. It's just that this spiritual law doesn't wait for God in his Heaven to invoke it. The law

is here, it's in our hearts, be they hearts of stone or hearts of flesh. So no, God doesn't damn America. Greed does.

What is greed? Forget the cartoon dollar sign in the eyeball. Greed doesn't come only in green. Greed lies in everyone, varying but in degree. Think of it as the fixed intention to serve my need, not yours, when these conflict. It was Derek Chauvin's greed that killed George Floyd. Police brutality has greed at root, as does almost all violence—murder, sexual violence, domestic abuse, theft, corruption, war, structural racism . . . Why, Jesus said calling your neighbor names is as good as murder. Greed's got the whole world in its hand.

In 1967, right here in “this magnificent house of worship”—as he put it at the opening of the speech entitled “Beyond Viet Nam”—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke sharply about the working of greed in America:

I am convinced that . . . we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. (Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence)

Dr. King would today name not triplets, but quadruplets, for climate change stands in the lineup with the others. What have they in common? What one source is animating racism, materialism, lust for war, and climate destruction? We need only dig a little in our own nature to uncover the root, greed—this settled insistence on serving my need, regardless what you need.

In the half century since they killed the prophet, America, alas, has not “undergo[ne] a radical revolution of values.” We are a thing-oriented society. As were Israel and Judah on whom the prophets dropped doom. As was ancient Egypt, and Greece, and Rome. And so, with all the empires, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, the U.S. of A. and now China. Those already fallen fell brutally under the law of greed. Will the U.S.A. long endure? History says No, not long—not without a radical revolution in values. How?

Last Sunday, Rev. Livingston's sermon here moved in sorrow and compassion over the ground of terrors and traumas visited on America's people of color. He recalled you to the witness of those who suffer, yet trust that God's grace is sufficient unto you; that “power is made perfect in weakness.” Today, we turn to consider not the disinherited, but those with privileges, those who do not suffer or do not know they suffer, but have comfort. How is greed at work in the dominant culture? Why do millions of white Americans, like that priest Amaziah, want to shut up every voice that testifies to the tragedies of racism? Why so afraid that “the land is not able to bear all their words”?

What political analysis cannot perceive is that greed itself has a source. Greed comes from despair. Despair at oblivion, despair at worthlessness and meaninglessness, despair at disease and death ever stalking the body. Ameri-

cans' obsessive pursuit of material gain, of success, of supremacy, of exceptionalism, has one purpose—to drown awareness of hopelessness in the face of death. Greed is this spiritual disease. All of America's violence against people of color has been driven by the dominant culture's dread of worthlessness, endlessly trying to build and to climb a ladder to salvation with things we can control—money, people, power. In a thing-oriented society, bad schools for the poor and bad housing, bad medicine, bad jobs and bad justice belong to the structure of white despair. If there can come a radical revolution of values, these things must be seen first as challenges in spiritual renewal, and only then in terms of policy change.

James Baldwin perceived the spiritual desolation in white America. He wrote the way a surgeon cuts, not flinching as the tissue of disease is laid bare. Here are excerpts of a 1972 essay² addressing the despair at work in the white nation:

If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have needed to invent . . . what they still call "the Negro problem." This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them. (386)

White America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real . . . because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country; and the effect of this massive and hostile incomprehension is to increase the danger in which all black people live here, especially the young." (455)

White men have killed black men for refusing to say "Sir": but it was the corroboration of their own worth and their power that [the white man] wanted, not the corpse . . . When the black man's mind is no longer controlled by the white man's fantasies . . . the white man no longer knows who he is. (471) (emphases not in Baldwin's text)

The terror of being trash, being unforgiven—an existential fear for which real religion offers real guidance—has instead been met by violent measures to be pure, to be worthy, to never confess what we have done and become. In *The Atlantic* last June, Clint Smith wrote that the psychological value of slavery was available to all white people. Its existence "meant there were always millions of people beneath you." This holds for all structures of racial disparity. They are built by the tragedy of greed, enforcing my value by destroying yours.

If it is valid that, in the main, the religion of the American churches is just not working; just not helping people regulate their greed; just not leading in love's power, made perfect in weakness, to learn to let go, at the right time, of what we hold too tightly; just not teaching people how to die to themselves that others might live—well, where do we go from here?

Begin with this. When the doctor says your brother is sick, your heart of flesh answers first in compassion. Well, the despair in white America is real sickness, and compassion is wanting. This is not to condone oppression or complacency toward oppression. But God almighty! they do not know what they do! What shall any who see do?

This morning, we read from the Acts of the Apostles, how they and the elders came together in Jerusalem to consider what Peter was telling them about God freely giving the Holy Spirit to all kinds of people outside the law and the rituals of the Jews. Peter declared his certainty that God “has made no distinction between them and us,” that we and they are all saved the same.

Think about those elders, listening. They are men of learning and prestige. Like all conservatives everywhere, they have the law, God’s law, the scriptures. They have it memorized! And the law is clear: Gentiles, uncircumcised and unclean, cannot be received by God. The elders are naturally greedy for God. They can cast out Peter and Paul. So, elders, choose. Will it be your Bible and the old ways you know—oppression for them, succession for us?

Or will you trust God Holy Spirit to write a new law on your hearts, now?

Now all the assembly kept silence. In this silence, the elders let go their greed to control their salvation. It is a moment of profound humility and remorse. They recall the high, hard walls they built against all kinds of people, to guard their own purity and worthiness. In the silence, the walls fall. They hear Barnabas and Paul tell the wonders of God at work with those once called unclean, those they had murdered in spirit and flesh,

My hope for America lies in the silence of assemblies where remorse and compassion overwhelm greed and despair. In his meditation on Frederick Douglass’ Fourth of July speech, Jacob Needleman imagines it this way. At last. . .

. . . to see that America too, no less than the slave masters of Egypt and Rome or the blind, murdering armies of every nation in history. . . is asleep to conscience . . . And when America accepts this truth about itself . . . will our heroes no longer be heroes, our triumphs no long triumphs? Not at all. On the contrary. Yet, at the same time, something entirely new and necessary will fill every limb and cell of the story of America—and that something has a very precise designation: humility, and the need to experience the taste of genuine remorse.³

This can happen when all the assembly keeps silence.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

delivered at The Riverside Church

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/05/gops-critical-race-theory-fixation-explained/618828/>

2. James Baldwin, No Name in the Street. Page references in the sermon text come from the Library of America edition.

3. Jacob Needleman, The American Soul, p. 239-240