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Amos 5:18-24 (R.S.V.)

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JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

"Let justice flow down like waters, and
righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
--Amos 5:24

Do not these words of the ancient prophet, Amos, reflect the hopes and dreams of all mankind? Justice and righteousness!

Some 20 years ago in his farewell speech, a retiring United States senator quoted what a French traveler of a 100 years before had written of America's greatness:

"I further sought for the reason for her growth, and her glory, and her great genius, and her greatness, and I found it in her schools, churches, and homes ablaze with righteousness."

The senator then went on to say:

"So it is, fellow senators, America is great because she is good. When America is no longer good, she will no longer be great."

Both the senator and Alexis De Tocqueville, who was that early French traveler, were but echoing the words of the author of Proverbs whom tradition has it was none other than the wisest of all men, King Solomon. Wrote he: "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people."

I would submit to you this morning that something has gone wrong with the soul of America. When a leading figure in our State Department insists that government officials have the right to lie, when other countries say that they cannot trust the United States to keep its word; when there is a concerted effort to remove all religion from our public life; when crime, divorce, and alcoholism are increasing at a startling rate -- then I say, something has gone wrong with the soul of America.

May it not well be that the basic difficulty lies in the absence of what De Tocqueville saw and felt to be essential -- "schools, churches and homes ablaze with righteousness?" Do we see that in our country today? I love my country. I believe it is the grandest land on earth, and I am a firm believer in an old-fashioned patriotism, but I must face the realities and see America as she is if I am going to fulfill my responsibility to her and to God. And I do not see the land ablaze with righteousness.

It may well be that the trouble with Americans today is that they have sought all else before they have sought righteousness and justice. They have been preoccupied with comfort, freedom and security and have shunned responsibility. The first duty of every man is to find not his freedom, but his responsibility. Until he discovers and fulfills that, he can find no freedom.

Said Amos, "Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Justice and righteousness! These are two imperatives for every nation, but righteousness comes first. There can be no justice in the absence of righteousness, and righteousness means precisely what the root of the word implies, "right-wiseness." We must be wise as to what is right. The word "just" means "according to what is right." So righteousness always must come first.

III

Where does right-wisdom begin? It begins with the training of the individual in right thoughts, right deeds, right understanding. This was the end and the goal of early American education. One hundred years ago Horace Mann wasn't concerned with teaching students modern dance or the theory of education. The philosophy of education then was to give students an understanding of what was right and good and true. The McGuffey readers may be dated and stilted, but they did what they were intended to do -- teach right-wisdom. Morals and ethics were at the heart of education. They are no longer, and the nation is the loser.

How often have the wisest men in history assured us that we reap what we sow, that there are consequences for every action, that there is indeed a moral law. When Moses brought the Ten Commandments down off the mountain he did not bring with him any threats or dire warnings of what would happen if those Commandments were not kept. "There," he said, "are the laws of God." No one needed to be told that if the laws of God were not kept, there would be unpleasant results. Men certainly understood that if this was an orderly world under the rule of God then there were indeed consequences for every action. You and I, if we will read history, will have no difficulty understanding what some of those consequences are. But every generation seems to think that it can break the laws, and ignore the rules, and laugh at the principles and get away with it. We never get away with it.

Let me put it on a very simple and personal basis with an illustration. There was once a little boy with a very fiery temper. It often caused him to do or say unkind things. One day his father told him that for each thoughtless, mean thing he did, the father would drive a nail into the gate post; for each good and kind deed, a nail would be withdrawn. As the nails increased, getting them out became a challenge. At last the great day arrived -- only one nail left. As the father withdrew it, the boy danced around proudly exclaiming, "See, daddy, the nails are all gone." "Yes," agreed the father. "The nails are all gone, but see, the scars remain."

It is ever so with individuals and with nations. The scars of wrong doing and unjust action must remain. The sin may be forgiven, but the consequences are there and are not wiped out. It is for this reason that the Bible insists, "The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation." It is not because God is angry, not because he is vengeful, but because this is a dependable, orderly, and consistent world. He has warned us over and over again that this is a world of cause and effect. Do good and you shall live; fail in righteousness and you plant the seeds of misery and disaster.

Some people, because they have failed in righteousness and are now bearing the consequences, think this is a very unjust world. Some of them will always consider it unjust unless they, in spite of their actions, continually prosper whether they deserve it or not. If they get more than they deserve, they do not accuse God of being unjust. It is only when they get less than they would like to have that God is felt to be unjust. I have had people complain to me about the former, but I have seldom had anyone come to my office and complain, "God is not fair, he's given me far too much: more than I deserve!"

Albert J. Nock tells in one of his books of an experience in his boyhood which always made him wonder whether or not it did really pay to be good. One of the meanest, stingiest men in his town, who was referred to as Elder T, seemed to be anything but good, yet he became singularly blessed. Nock says this about him:

"I remember well the thick cloud of despondency that settled over the whole

population when it was made known that what Mrs. Malaprop called, "an unscrupulous Providence" had permitted the biggest muskie ever taken out of our favorite fishing ground to be hooked by Elder T. Enraged eye witnesses said he was out only a few yards from shore in a very light canoe, fishing for pan fish in three or four feet of water with borrowed tackle. When the muskie took his hook it frightened him so that he dropped his pole, but the reel caught under the thwart. The drag happened to be on and by some miracle the line held; it ran out full, meanwhile communicating motions to the boat and the muskie snaked the Elder hither and yon until some of the boys put out from shore, and after a very pretty fight brought the fish in. It weighed 45 pounds. This episode was regarded as a stain on the community. What most distressed our inveterate old professors of the sport was that the wretched man had never dropped a hook in water before in all his life; This seemed the very refinement of cosmic injustice."

Now, of course, it is true that there are many things that happen in our world which you and I cannot understand, and the justice of which is beyond us. But anyone who really seeks to understand history will soon discover that over the long run the consequences of evil are more evil, and the consequences of good are more good. In God's universe no man ever gets away with anything. He always pays a price for every disobedience of God's law, and because man is a social creature often those who love him must suffer with him. The only way, for instance, that God could prevent a mother from suffering when her son does wrong is to take away from that mother the power of loving, and surely no one of us would want that.

III

I wish there were time this morning for us to deal at great length with the wonderful Book of the Prophet Amos. I wish that I could believe that every one of you would go home this morning and read it, especially the fifth chapter from which our text is taken. Listen as Amos describes the nature of God who created the heavens, who makes the day, who brings forth the night, and who causes the rain to fall:

"He would made the Pleiades and Orion,
And turns deep darkness into the morning,
And darkens the day into night,
Who calls forth the waters of the sea,
And pours them out upon the surface of the earth,
The Lord is his name..."

And what is the message that Amos brings to the people from this great and good God? It is this, "Seek the Lord and live!" He says it in many ways:

"Seek good and not evil that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate."

And then he concludes with these ringing words:

"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

Because there is a God, these things we have talked about this morning are true. His existence gives the moral law validity. His universe is full of order and meaning and is governed by natural and moral absolutes, and that law itself is the strongest indicator of God's existence and nature.

Why does this law exist? Is it not because the whole process is headed in a definite direction? God is in his laws guiding and directing man toward some ultimate destination. We are not adrift in a meaningless, uncaring universe. Everything points toward some goal -- "some far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves." Of this I for one am absolutely convinced.

PASTORAL PRAYER

What can man say unto thee, O Lord? Glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving be unto thee, and may thy will be done in us.

We thank thee that thou dost turn night into day, and winter into spring. In like manner thou canst turn our sorrow into rejoicing and our defeats into victory. For thou art the source of all our strength and health. Thou art the author of all goodness and beauty. Thy love sustains and keeps all.

Increase, O Lord, our capacity to know and understand that which is pure and good. Strengthen our will to resist that which is low and common -- that which is unworthy of the children of God. Help us to think on those things which are good, and lovely, and beautiful. So may our minds and bodies become better instruments for thy holy purposes.

May we ever grow in understanding of thee, and through thee of one another. With love and compassion for one another, may our little fellowship resemble more and more thy perfect kingdom. May we learn to accept our difficulties and sufferings without whimpering and rebellion, and with calm assurance fix our minds on thee, knowing that with those who love thee, all things can work together for good.

Help us now to wait unhurriedly on thee that we might come to know and understand thee better and use our lives as they were meant to be used -- to discover thee.