

July 15, 2018
Mark 6:14-29 | Amos 7:7-15
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By now I imagine most of us have seen or heard about the article in last Sunday's Star Tribune. The one about the demise of the church. How declining attendance and loss of membership has led to closings of many churches throughout Minnesota and the U.S. The Episcopal Church is described as having lost half its membership since 1990. Thank goodness the recent convention didn't vote to revise the Prayer Book again. The article offered no thoughts on why this is happening. Or what might be done about it. So, we are left to imagine the causes for ourselves. The reality is probably much broader than we imagine. Certainly, the demands on peoples' time forces them to make choices that were not acceptable just a few decades ago. But polling has also shown a steady decline of trust in many of our public and private institutions as well. There seems to be an increase in failure to live up to ethical standards in business and government. That has probably contributed to that growing distrust. The church is not immune from those lapses. One of the things I find most concerning is what has happened to the truth. Over time the exposure of ethical lapses has created an attitude of cynicism. An attitude that has made the truth seem increasingly elusive, perhaps even unknowable. It seems truth itself has been rendered a mere matter of personal belief about any given set of facts. In such an environment claiming all truths to be equally valid is possible and believable.

And that is why there are prophets. Because there are indeed truths in the world. Prophets are people tapped by God to remind us of them. To remind us that not every way of seeing the world leads to attitudes and behaviors acceptable to God. Prophets are sent to challenge us when we get so comfortable and self-focused that we forget these truths. Or when we stretch the truth in order to justify some action or practice. They are seemingly ever-present. As we try to avert our eyes they are there to say again and again, "Hey look over here!". "Do you see what's going on over here?" "How do you think that fits with what God wants?" As a result, they are also hugely annoying. That was why John the Baptist was in prison in the first place. And why Amos was encouraged to leave Israel.

In today's lesson from Mark, John's quarrel with Herod is over a matter of religious law. Herod has divorced his wife and married the wife of his dead brother Philip. He has claimed the right to do so under Levitical law. But Philip did not die childless, which renders Herod's claim illegitimate. So, John has been hammering away on that point. Herod has to do something. Just to keep peace in the family if nothing else. And the something is to throw John in prison. The rest of the story is textbook humanity on display. Fear, self-indulgence, resentment, deceit, grandiosity, probably drunkenness and maybe even a touch of lust all make their appearance. It is Herod's grandiose offer to Salome that opens the door to disaster. It is probably at this point in the story that we feel our breath catch momentarily. Because we, like Herod probably did, realize that a critical line has been crossed. It is an experience that we all know and recognize. An oath sworn in a moment of magnanimity or anger and regretted the instant it escapes

our mouth. Because we know it can't be taken back. And because we know in that instant that it violates what God would have us do.

In the reading from Amos, the prophet is asked to leave Israel because of his statements about the king's future. Amos' dispute is actually not with the king. And it is not about the violation of religious law per se. God has Amos speaking to the people of Israel. His concern is all about social injustice in the land. Under Jeroboam the northern kingdom has prospered. The rich live plush and self-indulgent lives. Accumulation of wealth and its consumption on extravagant living is rampant. Commerce is more important than observance of holy days. Dishonest practices in trade and public affairs are common. Meanwhile the people suffer. Debtors are sold into slavery. The poor and needy are bought and sold for a pittance. People turn aside from helping the afflicted. Amos is reminding the people of God's expectation. The threat against the king is merely the last straw and he is asked to leave. A request he tactfully denies by claiming not be a real prophet.

These two stories essentially are about the struggle between power and resistance to its excesses. Fertile ground for the prophet. But they are also about the choice between worldly authority and spiritual authority. About which will serve as the guide for our life. They demonstrate the desire of the powerful and comfortable to avoid the truth by silencing the critic. Stopping the truth-telling is paramount. Expulsion, exile, imprisonment and even execution are acceptable methods, even today. Impugning the character of the messengers and the credibility of the institutions they represent are more commonplace in the modern world. Whatever it takes to intimidate and silence those who speak out against the excesses of the powerful is acceptable.

Lately, asserting that truth depends on one's perception is a way to legitimize practices that deny the truth. As Christians we know the truth of how God wants us to behave towards all people and the rest of creation. It is found in our sacred scriptures and the long tradition of the church. For us the Gospel is the lens through which we are called to view the world. And it is the authority with which we must judge the truth. The last I checked the church is still alive and present and capable of telling the truth. That voice is essential to the current public discourse. In the end it cannot be silenced unless we abdicate our responsibility as disciples.

Amen.