

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 17, 2009 | The Peace Pulpit

If we listen to the three scripture lessons carefully today, we discover that in each of them, God takes an initiative in a time of crisis. God enters in to the activities of God's people. In the first lesson today, it's very clear that it's God's initiative that has brought it about that Amos has gone to the king's palace and has gone there to challenge the king and the elite of the people, the rich.

This was a time in the history of the chosen people where, under that king Jeroboam in the northern kingdom, they had become very rich. They were at a peak of material prosperity, but there was a huge problem because there was a small elite who had that wealth and who luxuriated in it. Most of the people were living in poverty, destitution, want, and the elite cared nothing about them.

That's why God sends Amos, and Amos speaks to them in words that obviously are not going to make him well received: "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and sprawl on your couches. You eat lamb from the flock and veal from calves, fattened in the stall. You strum on your harps and like David, try out new musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and anoint yourselves with the finest of oil. But you do not grieve over the ruins of Joseph," that is, over God's people who are in destitution.

That's why, in the passage that we heard today, Amos has spoken out so strongly and Amaziah, the priest, who is like a palace chaplain to the king, and there was a whole group of so-called prophets that always spoke whatever the king wanted to hear. Amos comes in and speaks differently. Amaziah the priest tells Amos, "Off with you, seer. Go back to the land of Judah, but never again prophecy at Bethel," that is the king's palace, for here is the king's sanctuary and a national shrine.

But then here is where Amos points out it wasn't his idea to come there. He was very reluctant.

He said, "Look, I am not a prophet or one of the fellow prophets; I am a breeder of sheep," he was a shepherd "and a dresser of sycamore trees" ? he was a farmer "but God took me from shepherding the flock and said to me: 'Go, and from me, speak to my people Israel.'" So it was clearly God's initiative that brought this about that Amos goes and becomes a prophet against the king and the elite.

In the second lesson today, the same thing is happening, where we see how God takes an initiative. In this case, Paul points out that "by a decree of God, who disposes all things, according to God's plan and decision, we, the Jews, have been chosen and called. We were awaiting the Messiah, for the praise of God's glory." But then he speaks to the Gentiles: "You, on hearing the word of truth, the gospel that saves you, have believed in God. And as promised, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit." So Paul says, "God chose all of us in Jesus, to be holy and without sin in God's presence. From eternity, God destined us in love to be God's sons and daughters."

So again, God has taken the initiative. In this instance, it's not made so clear in this particular passage, but part of this was how God had chosen -- against the customs of the early church -- to even choose Gentiles, pagans,

those who were not Jews, to become disciples of Jesus without becoming Jews first. This had been a tremendous struggle in the early church. There were those, many of the leaders and the first disciples, who said, "No. You must become a Jew before you are a follower of Jesus." Paul shows how God took the initiative and sent the disciples to the Gentiles, Paul being the leader of them.

And in the gospel lesson, obviously, it's God who is taking the initiative through Jesus. If you reflect on it, it almost seems that Jesus was saying, "Look, I'm too much of a controversial person right now." His own kind, his own relatives, rejected him so he says, "Maybe I'll hold back a little bit," and he takes the initiative to send out the disciples and have them do the preaching, the healing and the anointing of the sick.

He sends them out in a very special way to show how it's God's initiative working, because he says, "Don't take any material goods with you. Don't try to dominate the people by your importance and by your wealth. Go without any resources except the word of God, and proclaim that."

So this is how God takes initiative through Jesus to begin the spread of the gospel far beyond where Jesus could go during his short earthly life.

If we think about this and realize how God took initiative, actually 2,700 years ago during the time of Amaziah the priest and Jeroboam the king and Amos the prophet, God took the initiative then, God took the initiative with the disciples Jesus sends out, God took initiative with Paul in reaching out to the Gentiles ? wouldn't you expect that God would be taking initiative within our own situations, whatever they are, within our church, within our society?

The truth is, of course, God does take initiative. We have to be alert to it, and sometimes, I'm afraid, we reject the very ones that God sends to us. There are two situations that occurred to me this past week, where it seems to me, it's clear God has taken initiative, but we who are of the church, and maybe in some sense the leaders of our church especially, refused to recognize the initiative that God is taking.

Earlier this week, I met with a friend of mine. In fact, I ordained him quite a few years ago and he's been a missionary in Tanzania for 25-30 years at least. He was telling me where he is in this country in Africa, he's the pastor of a church and there are 72 outstations ? 72 separate places where somehow, he and the ministers he draws around him have to try to proclaim the gospel. Obviously, it's impossible, isn't it? There's no way he can do the job.

That's in Africa. Then there was an article in *The Michigan Catholic* this week that caught my attention. It's a survey of what's going on around our country, where place after place, church after church is being closed. It points out, in Cleveland, the diocese has closed 27 parishes within the city of Cleveland itself ? 27 within the city and most of them in the black community ? and then 67 altogether throughout the diocese because there are no priests.

The article lists other diocese: Camden, New Jersey, this year they closed 56 of 124 parishes because they have no priests. Syracuse, New York, 36 out of 173. Scranton, Pennsylvania, more than 100 parishes in a diocese where there is less than 200. What's happening? Why aren't we listening? Isn't God taking any initiative to provide us with the ministers we need?

The answer is, of course God has, and there are those who have proclaimed how God has called them, and I'm talking, of course, about women, and we refuse to accept them as ministers.

In the early church, women did go out and proclaim the good news. In today's Gospel, Jesus sends out the 12, but you can be sure there was another time where it's recorded he sent out 72 in pairs, and surely there were men and women that went together and preached. Now when we are so desperately in need of priests, ministers of

the gospel, ministers of the Eucharist, we don't have them.

And there are those who are calling for it, but then they're pushed away like Amos was pushed away, silenced. "You can't speak about that as a possibility, not to speak about ordaining married men or about women." Yet, I am confident that God is taken an initiative and we who are the church have to begin to listen to that and to respond to it and try to make sure our leaders respond to it.

The other thing that came up this week ? it's very similar, in fact, to what was happening 2,700 years ago in the time of Amos. We live in a world -- not just a country, but a world -- where a few are still very rich in spite of a global crisis that's been going on and the vast majority are poor.

One child under five dies every five seconds in our world.

Every five seconds, a child dies of hunger and malnutrition.

Of course, we've experienced economic crisis, but on a global basis, it's so much worse. In the poor areas of the world, and in poor parts of our country, food prices have gone up 40 percent. Wheat and rice have gone up 100 percent. Those who have been desperately poor become poor beyond description, almost.

Two people spoke out this week. One was President Obama at the G8 Meeting. He pressed and pushed until they agreed to increase the assistance of the rich nations toward the poor nations, and when he went to Africa the other day, he proclaimed how important it was for countries like Ghana and other countries in Africa to receive assistance, but he also pointed out their responsibility to use it carefully, to get rid of corruption in their government and so on. So he was speaking and we need to listen.

Another person who spoke out this week was Pope Benedict. He issued an encyclical letter: *Caritas in Veritate*, "Charity in Truth" is the name of it. It's a continuation of the Catholic social teachings of the Church, and it calls for, once more, our church to take leadership and try to reach out to the poor of the world, to follow up the statements we have made before, statements that call upon us to do action for justice and participate in the transformation of the world as constitutive dimensions of the gospel.

Benedict is telling us we have to follow up on that, and he's asking us (this may be one of the key things in his encyclical, and I will quote it): "Once profit becomes the exclusive goal ? and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty." In other words, he puts the emphasis on what has been a very Catholic teaching from our very beginning, the common good. We cannot simply have profit for individual good; we have to look to the common good. So Pope Benedict is speaking out at this moment and in fact, he gave a copy of that encyclical letter to President Obama, and President Obama promised he would read it and continue to proclaim, on his own part, the need to change international economic relationships so that the common good is recognized.

So there are ways in which God is taking initiative in our midst, in our time, and these are two very important crises that we have in our church and in our world. I hope all of us will listen to those whom God sends to speak to these issues so that we will push that our church will take the initiative that is needed, so that we can have a church that is blessed, through the initiatives of God, with ministers throughout the world, and that we can have a world that will be blessed because everyone will have a chance for a full human life.

If we listen to those whom God sends to us and follow what God is urging upon us, tremendous change can take place in our church and in our world.

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