

Twenty-fifth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Amos 8:4-7
Ps 113

1 Tim 2:1-8
Lk 16:1-13

Fair play, a better way

Only a few weeks ago, we heard from the prophet Jeremiah and saw how his prophesying roused the powers-that-be to move against him. Now today, we hear from the prophet Amos, one of the early prophets of Israel, who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom at a time of great prosperity for that place. Because they would not repent – the materially and spiritually corrupt powers-that-be – Amos pronounced divine judgment upon them, his message being “one of almost unrelieved gloom” against the unrepentant leaders of Israel, who dared to invoke the name of the Lord, but whose religion was without justice or righteousness, whose practices were without fairness or evenhandedness.

Our first reading is only a *brief* excerpt from only *one* of Amos’s prophecies against the moral and spiritual corruption of Israel’s leaders, where the prophet inveighs against the irreligion and greed of the elite. Their irreligion is revealed in their thoughts, which Amos calls out, as they talk among themselves: “*When will the new moon be over, that we may sell our grain, and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat?*” For them, the sabbath is offensive, an obstacle to making money; the holy day of rest is an annoyance, a hindrance to their greed. They want the sabbath over and done,

God appeased and placated and dismissed, so they can get back to their plans, the pursuit of wealth.

And in pursuit of wealth, they become dishonest, unjust. Pay attention to how Amos calls them out, the specificity of their sins. First, there is dishonest manipulation of the weights and measures used in trade. *“We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating!”* The ephah, the shekel, were units of measurement. These, they tampered with. They even rigged the scales. And all this in their own favor, that of the wealthy and powerful elite. And all this at the expense of the poor farmers. Since these weights and measures were also used for currency, we have here an ancient example of currency manipulation, artificial inflation or deflation, all planned to the benefit of the few at the expense of the many.

Second, having cheated the hardworking poor out of their rightful due, those in authority “who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land” then conspire against the person of the poor: *“We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals.”* Economic injustice compounds the poverty of the poor, reducing them to the point of desperation. The poor, without means, without hope, will sell *themselves* into servitude for a pair of sandals. Why? Because they have no shoes for their feet. And the rich will buy them up, for a pittance, and go on to boast of their unfair gain, their sinful acquisition!

But the callousness of the rich is not over: *"Even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!"* They are so ruthless and contemptuous toward their poor countrymen that they will sell them the chaff, simply because they can. The chaff would ordinarily be tossed out or burned or used as fertilizer or animal feed. But the rich take advantage of the poor instead of dealing with them fairly and justly and humanely. What little they have they will take from them, in exchange for waste, for food that does not nourish.

But it did not have to be this way. It did not. This way is the way of irreligion, injustice, disgrace. And God speaks through his prophet, Amos, with words that I find chilling: *"Never will I forget a thing they have done!"*

Economic manipulation, financial fraud, unfair commercial practices, even today these things plague our society, which is becoming more and more corrupt all around us. We see it, but we don't want to admit it. We once prided ourselves on our integrity, our incorruptibility, our personal and social uprightness. But no longer. The wealthy and powerful – notice how those two things go together, nearly always – it is very hard to rise to a position of power without wealth, and then in order to stay in power, wealth is necessary – the wealthy and powerful work to rig the political and economic system in their favor. Laws and policies, tailor-made to their interests and not to the common good, are bought and paid for by those with the position and the means. This is so obvious to anyone who is fair-minded, that I hardly see the need to point out

concrete examples, which are abundant, and constantly in the news, plain to see for those who have the eyes to see.

But speaking of fair-mindedness, isn't this just what was at the heart of Amos's preaching? Fair weights and measures. Fair scales. Fair dealings with one another. Fairness. Fair play, open, honest, above-board, transparent, accountable. Fairness not only in our commercial dealings with one another, but also in our social interactions.

Everyone – I wish that were true – most people want fairness. Everyone wants to be treated fairly, and most people, I hope, want to treat others fairly. We want this in our sports: the rules established ahead of time, not made up on the spot or changed in the middle of the game, agreed to by all, applied to all equally, without preference or prejudice. Referees and umpires are impartial. We expect fair play, no cheating. Cheaters are dishonorable. When caught, they are called out, ejected, banned. This, too, is fair.

We want fairness in our families, in our schools, in our churches, in our parks, and grocery stores, and clubs, and restaurants, even in our traffic. Think about how often our sense of fairness is offended by others' bad behavior in traffic. The rules of the road and the basics of driving etiquette are known by all, and yet some people act unfairly because they want to do what they want to do. They don't want to be bothered by red lights or speed limits or safe

or courteous driving behaviors. Funny isn't it, how we have so little patience and understanding when others act unfairly, and so much when we do the same things! Them, we denounce and condemn. Ourselves, we excuse and acquit.

Remember only two weeks ago, when, using the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, we reflected on how hard it is for us to admit the exact nature of our wrongs, whether personal or collective? When it comes to fairness, this is very much apropos. As much as we say we love fairness, when it comes to our own affairs and interests, we are very unfair, first toward others, with whom we are far too harsh, and then toward ourselves, with whom we are far too lenient.

The great experiment in fair play is, of course, the social and political system called democracy. Democracy is not just a system of government, a political system. It is also an ethos, a principled mindset based on fairness. The democratic mindset holds, broadly speaking, that it is better to treat all individuals and all groups in the same way, since this is the most practical way to achieve peace and prosperity among people and groups with competing interests and outlooks.

The fair play character of democracies, though, is completely dependent on the democratic ethos of its people. In other words, if people stop caring about fairness, then democracy will devolve

into something less fair, with all the unjust and unfair outcomes that can be imagined, in things little and big.

Part of the democratic mindset is accepting that sometimes the other side prevails. Sometimes my side will win; sometimes my side will lose. This is a feature, not a flaw, of democracy. Those who will not accept this reality are not committed to the principled mindset of fairness that is necessary for democracy to survive. You need to know this. Because it's happening all around us, at the local, state, and national level. We seem to be losing our shared democratic ethos. And it is very concerning.

I, for one, and frankly most other Americans, highly prize fairness and democracy. I would not want to live under another political arrangement, even if that meant that my side always prevailed. Knowing what we know about human nature, we know from history and experience how quickly things can devolve into violent and oppressive authoritarianism if the foundations of the democratic mindset are weakened. Personally, I'd rather be on the losing side in a democracy than on the winning side in an authoritarian state. Why? Because I value fairness more than winning. Because democracies value fairness. Authoritarian states do not.

In democracies, the losing side is treated with fairness, because democracies are designed to treat all parties fairly, even the losing parties. It is part of democratic fairness that even minority

positions and groups have some say, some representation, that they are recognized, respected, and accounted for. That's not the case in non-democratic systems, where political opponents or social critics (like comedians) are subject to intimidation and coercion for what they say, or even for failing to be sufficiently supportive or enthusiastic about whatever the authorities are prioritizing from one moment to the next.

A key component in the fairness of a democratic system is having fair elections, where candidates for political office can compete in the arena of ideas and policies on set and level playing field. One of the most common ways that politicians and their wealthy and powerful supporters try to tilt the scales in their favor is by gerrymandering, which both major political parties in our country have done and continue to do – Democrats in blue states and Republicans in red states.

It is a relief that the vast majority of Americans oppose political gerrymandering. But now those of us who want fairness in our political system and who oppose gerrymandering as unfair, undemocratic, and even immoral have to find a way to transfer that sense of democratic fairness onto our elected officials, who can have very undemocratic tendencies when that means that their political position and power are made vulnerable.

Gerrymandering is so prevalent, and so effective, that only about nine percent of all congressional races in our country are

competitive. Only 37 out of 435 congressional races in the last two elections were resolved by less than five percentage point. Ninety-one percent of all congressional races are non-competitive, meaning the dominant party is virtually assured victory. This is staggering and unacceptable. At both the state and national level, voters are no longer choosing their politicians; politicians, through gerrymandering, are choosing the voters who will keep them in power.

This is not a good sign for a healthy democracy. It is also one of the reasons why people are so down on their politicians. If you're dissatisfied and would like a change – even within your own party – it's nearly impossible. And the recent, blatantly political mid-decade redistricting provocation begun in Texas, which other states are now reacting to, demonstrates just how corrupt and undemocratic so many of our political leaders have become. There is very little support, across party lines, for what the Texas state legislature just did. Fairness was not their concern. Winning was. And I say it is undemocratic both in spirit and in deed.

Our faith commitments have to have a resonance in our political opinions and in our public policy positions. Fairness is a biblical and a prophetic concern. And for most Americans, that matters, a lot. For most Americans, fairness is baked into our bones, and we rightly recoil at unfair practices, even when our side is guilty of them. Consequently, fairness must be part of every Christian's personal and public ethos. We must take seriously what God said

through the prophet Amos as he rebuked the scheming unfairness of Israel's leaders, *Never will I forget a thing they have done!* and act accordingly.

Perhaps Americans will have more success getting through to their politicians that fairness matters, personally, morally, and politically. But for that to happen, Americans will have to have to rediscover the prophetic awareness and political courage shown by the prophets. The prophets, rightly outraged by the unfairness in their midst and rightly motivated by a desire to please God rather than men, took action by speaking boldly and clearly.

May all God's people always and everywhere be filled with such a prophetic spirit and speak with such a prophetic voice! *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!* (Num 11:29).