

When the Truth Is Hard to Hear
Amos 7:7--15
Mark 6:14-29

“Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.’”

On the Sunday after the murders in Mother Emmanuel Church, I was desperate for a word from the Lord. Thinking that the United Church of Christ was my best bet, I threw on the one dress I had packed and hightailed it to Brunswick. When I slipped into the back pew and opened the bulletin, I discovered that the female minister was on vacation and a bonafide father was speaking on Fathers’ Day. I confess that I fled and floored it to the Presbyterians in Topsham where worship begins at 10:10 a.m. There the marquee announced that a retired minister I had known in New Jersey was preaching on “Lessons I Learned from My Children.” Surely he would have done what Austin did so powerfully and prophetically: would have listened anew for God’s word in the aftermath of Charleston. He did not. I both fumed and wept as I sat through the lessons his children had taught him, lessons that apparently did not include the importance of wrestling with the chaos of evil. To be fair, the man prayed for the families of the victims later in the service; but I needed a word from the Lord and so I read sermons on the internet all afternoon. Not only did I hear the gospel powerfully proclaimed by Austin, but also by Agnes Norfleet at Bryn Mawr, J. C. Austin at Fifth Avenue in New York City, a seminarian at Madison Avenue, a Lilly Fellow at Central Presbyterian in Atlanta. “Every preacher in America worth their salt ripped up their sermon and started over,” Nadia Bolz Weber said to her own congregation.

Sometimes the truth is hard to hear because no one is willing to speak it; but sometimes the truth is hard to hear because to hear would be to change our lives, as preacher and hearer, in some radical way. The stories before us are two cases in point.

In each story, the word of the Lord indicts the morally bankrupt world of the powerful and the privileged. Yet in each story there is also a silence, a pause, a phrase that suggests the main character has been given, by God, the freedom to hear and be changed. In Amos, that character is Amaziah, the priest who must decide how to respond to a devastating word of the Lord. Once he had given his life to the service of the Lord, to the keeping of God's commandments, to the tending of God's people. But that was before he had an institution to maintain, tithes to collect, the status quo to uphold, the powerful to please. Now religion and not revelation, sedimented tradition and not the living word of God, social location and not social justice, the king and not the promised reign of God, ordered his seeing and hearing, his deciding and doing. When Amos arrived in the land with a word from the Lord that spelled doom and defeat for the king and his kingdom, for Amaziah there is a pause, a moment, a silence in the story that I take to be the time and space and freedom given Amaziah by God to be human in.

In the second story, Herod is the character given the freedom to hear. When he hears about Jesus and is made privy to speculations about who Jesus is, Herod says without hesitation, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." Typical of Mark, a story is then inserted within the story, a flashback to Herod's arrest and beheading of John. To please Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, who is now Herod's wife, John is imprisoned. Because the word of the Lord to Herod from John had been a word against his marriage, Herodias has a grudge against John and wants him killed. Herod does not oblige at first, because he fears this holy and righteous man; but more than fearing John, Mark writes that "he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to

listen” to John. This is the pause, the moment, the silence, the time and space God is giving even Herod to be human in.

You and I know these pauses, these moments, these silences in our personal and collective lives. I am thinking, presently, of Charleston, the pause in the courtroom, the unimaginable time and space given the families by God to be human in the face of evil, the words of forgiveness that opened the way for a flag to come down. I am thinking of the Supreme Court decision that has made marriage equality the law of the land, history arcing toward justice according to the majority, toward hubris and stupidity according to the dissenters. God is giving us this time and this space to be human in. But I am also thinking of those hard to hear words between a wayward child and a fearful parent, between an adult child and an aging parent, between an addict and a truth-telling friend, between a prophet and a priest. A word is spoken, a word that is abhorrent to the way we long have seen things, a word that changes everything, a word that removes us from the driver’s seat of our lives, a word that perplexes us because it is so contrary to our well-established certainties, a word that places us on the wrong side, the losing side, the unrighteous side of human history. As it was with Amaziah and Herod, so it is with us: that moment, that pause, that silence after the word is spoken, is the space and the time given us by God to be human in. But how?

I am coming as close this morning as I ever will come to recommending what could be considered a self-help book to you. Mostly I abhor these books because they rely on the false theological assumption that human beings are morally perfectible, that we are saved by the determination of our own wills. David Brooks skates on the edge of this abyss; but because he is a fan of Reinhold Niebuhr and John Calvin and Augustine, “The Humility Code” he offers up at

the end of *The Road to Character* does not send us off the deep end. Of the Code's fifteen propositions, I offer an amalgam of three that might be of help when the truth is hard to hear.

The first proposition is that we do not live for happiness but for holiness. "Life is essentially a moral drama, not a hedonistic one," Brooks says. Ever since Scripture was written, the charge of hedonism has had something to do with the disordered love of things and of people. The choices we make every day are often choices between doing those things that bring us momentary pleasure [think Herod] *and* doing those things with our time, money, passions, minds and relationships that anchor our lives and the lives of our children in a purpose greater than ourselves. The word of the Lord from Amos to Israel and from John to Herod was a word spoken to turn lives ordered by momentary pleasure into lives ordered by moral struggle. It seems to me that if marriage is the moral seriousness of two people ordering their love and promising their future selves to each other without condition, save the condition of death, then the truth that may be hard to hear in the pause, the moment, the silence of this time and space, given us by God to be human in, is the truth that God's GLBT children have fought to have their lives ordered by the moral struggle that marriage is and prevailed. You could say the battle was about happiness, but I believe the victory was about holiness.

The second proposition has to do with the struggle between humility and pride. According to Brooks, "Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos....an awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness....Pride [on the other hand] blinds us to our own weaknesses and misleads us into thinking we are better than we are. Pride makes us more certain and closed-minded....Pride makes coldheartedness and cruelty possible." Even those with low self-esteem are prideful in a self-pitying way rather than in an outwardly arrogant way. Consider again those moments, those

pauses, those silences when your central place in the cosmos, be it privileged or pitiable, has been threatened by the moral claims of another, by a truth that is hard to hear.

I cannot speak to growing up in the South under the Confederate flag as Austin could, but I do know what it is to grow up hearing, in subtle and not so subtle ways, that my nation, my class, my race was superior, my religion alone was true; and feeling that my struggle with these claims was unpatriotic or ungrateful or unfaithful. Brooks is saying that this life-long struggle between humility and pride *is* the time and space given Amaziah and Herod, given you and me by God for being human in. “The struggle against selfishness or prejudice or insecurity gives meaning and shape to life,” Brooks concludes. In fact, the ongoing struggle with racism may be the near-at-hand evidence that we are beginning to hear the truth about our own nature that is hard to hear, a truth that will haunt us and hunt us and humble us for the rest of our days.

The third proposition, what keeps The Humility Code from being a self-help technique, is Brooks’ acknowledgment that “individual will, reason, compassion and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody,” Brooks writes, “needs redemptive assistance from outside—from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, and exemplars....We are all ultimately saved by grace.” I promise not to break into song, but I have no doubt that grace alone enabled the family members of those murdered by human hatred to say, “I forgive you. God have mercy on your soul.” I believe their words were a word from the Lord that stopped hate in its tracks. I believe that grace alone propelled Jenny Home, a white Republican representative from the low country of South Carolina, to say tearfully and forcefully to her colleagues, “I cannot believe that we do not have the heart in this body to do something meaningful, such as take a symbol of hate off these grounds on Friday.” I believe her words were a word from the Lord that finally turned the tide.

“We need a power greater than ourselves to face ourselves right now,” Nadia Bolz Weber said from the pulpit on the Sunday evening after the murders. “I believe that the power of forgiveness we saw in the families of those whose loved ones had been shot dead—came not from themselves....I confess my belief that the power came from being a people who have heard the gospel and believed the gospel—a people who are formed by the Word of God and who have been formed in the image of Christ.”

In the end, Amaziah told the king that Amos was a threat to homeland security; that his word was unbearable for the people; that he had best get out of town. Herod ordered up John’s head on a silver platter, lest he disappoint his daughter and embarrass himself in front of a houseful of important guests. As for you and me, I need to tell you that this morning, Ken Lovett emailed me a picture of the “N” word that had been written twice in large letters on the choir chalk board sometime in the last few days. The pause, the moment, the silence is at hand, as is the grace revealed in Jesus Christ, who is here to save wretches just like us: a truth that is hard to hear. Thanks be to God.