

July 15, 2018 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Amos 7:7-15, Mark 6:14-29

References: Essay called Tell It Slant, by Camille T. Dungy about Emily Dickinson's poem Tell all the truth but tell it slant.
Fred Craddock quote from PreachingToday.com in Tiny Sacrifices.

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Last time we had an outdoor worship service, the gospel reading was tough, and it's tough again today.

I remember thinking to myself: you want me to read this outside? People might hear it!

Let me say this carefully: The gospel, I'm all about.

The way God makes life in the places of death—yep, I'm on it. All day.

But, these strange snippets of stories like we heard this morning,

stories that are more history than inspiration...

these stories, like today's gospels story, they give me pause.

Right here, in the middle of Mark, they are trying to figure out who Jesus is—that's well and good.

Is Jesus Elijah of old? Is he a prophet?

Is Jesus actually John the Baptist, raised from the dead?

Remember John the Baptist?

He's Jesus' cousin.

He's the one who wears itchy camels hair clothing and who eats wild honey and locust,

He's the one who goes ahead of Jesus, out in the wilderness,

calling for people to repent, calling them to prepare the way of the Lord.

That is...John does all this until Herod has him arrested, until he's beheaded.

Our gospel story gets weirder when Mark fills in that back story:

How Herod marries his brother's wife, crossing all the boundaries.

How, finally, to keep his word Herod is forced to have John the Baptist killed.

...John who had once again dared to name the truth,

to call everyone, including Herod, to just living,

to ask us—all of us—to turn, to change our way, to choose justice.

John who had dared to be a prophet, is now a prophet who becomes a martyr.

That's our Gospel story this morning and here we are outside!

Talk about trying to be a thoughtful church in a complex world!

John knew that complexity, so does Jesus, so do we.

It turns out that in our first reading Amos knows this complexity, too.

Amos is a farmer from the southern country of Judah before God calls on him to prophesy to Israel, the neighbor to the north.

In Judah, Amos takes care of the herds of livestock and the groves of sycamore trees.

But then God is standing there, before him, a plumb line in hand just in case we wonder on which side of justice we are to be.

Amos is forced to name the injustice in that land,

even to name the injustice that the king's own prophet chooses not to name.

We can be sure this doesn't win Amos friends, but still he follows God's call,

still he dares to be a prophet, to speak what he has heard.

A few chapters earlier it is Amos who refuses the meaningless worship and says, famously,

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

So that is our set up today: I am wondering how we too are called—like Amos, like John the Baptist, like Jesus, like prophets and martyrs in every age—to witness to justice, to tell the truth, to do the truth.

I've been thinking this week about Emily Dickinson's poem, *Tell all the truth but tell it slant.*

Emily Dickinson wrote in the mid 1800 with all sorts of "cultural tumult" around her,

all sorts of truths to tell: abolition, the Civil War, then the rights of the freed slaves, and women suffrage.

She knew the power of poetry to tell the truth, gradually, in a way that people could hear it and imagine it,

to tell the truth slant; and she used this poetic power over and over again.

Today we have a chance to write letters to our congressional leaders in Washington.

We'll be telling the truth about hunger and food insecurity around the world and close to home.

We're telling the truth about what we value, and how we are called to care for our neighbors

The policies of our nation, the legislation that gets passed (or not),

these all have an impact on real people, elders and kids and adults.

17% of U of M undergrads report worrying their food will run out, 10% actually experience food shortage.

Today we're writing letters through a program called Bread for the World.

We're writing letters about food insecurity, letters about hunger, telling our truth,

witnessing for just-decisions, being prophets.

You might be saying, All this sounds good, Jen, but what about going farther, what about John the Baptist who is martyred for the truth?

Preacher Fred Craddock once mused how giving our lives to Christ appears so glorious, pouring ourselves out for others, paying the ultimate price of martyrdom.

Craddock went on, "We think giving our all...is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table— 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.'

But the reality for most of us is that [God] sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there."

Listen to someone's troubles. Opt for the well being of the youngest and the oldest.

Write a letter for Bread for the World. Comfort someone in their grief. Resist. Persist.

Give someone the benefit of the doubt and move on.

Stand for what is right, even when it ruffles feathers.

Fred Craddock continues, "Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious.

It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.

It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory;

it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and there are others, they are recent martyrs.

I think, too, about the children and families separated, or Philando Castile and so many others.

People are dying, caught in the tensions as our communities work out our truth, what we value, and how.

Sometimes it is that martyr's death, but for most of us, it is 25 cents at a time, over and over again.

On Friday we held the funeral for one of Hope's beloved, Verle Rhoades.

Even at 97 years old, Verle was a faithful, hopeful force in this congregation.

She, along with Bertha Hanson, began Friendly Visitors.

She was a leader of the congregation, **served** on umpteen call committees,

led the renovation the sanctuary after an arson fire in the 90s,

guided our decisions not pulling us backward but propelling us forward.

Our minister of worship and music, Zach, tells of Verle's words to him when he first began this call.

Verle said, "Surprise us."

That was Verle's way of empowering us to trust one another, to lead one another,

knowing the history but telling God's truth in **this time**, in new ways, even surprising ways.

When members of this congregation die,

we remember how the waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.

We pray at the baptismal font, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

This week I wondered, "Should we wait to pray for Verle until we're inside the sanctuary at the font?"

No, it's not the font we focus on, it's the water, God's water active in this holy community, even outside.

Today we have moving water, beautiful moving water that **washes** us in forgiveness and

calls us back over and over again to witness to justice.

It's in that spirit that I invite you into prayer:

Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our sister Verle. We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At these waters of baptism, you welcomed her into your love. At these waters, you comforted her in times of trouble and encouraged her in delight. At these waters, you now enfold her into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with all the saints of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.