

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“FAMOUS FORGOTTEN HEROES: AMOS”

July 11, 2010

TEXT: Amos 7:7-17

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It's a fascinating book. The author is Stephen Prothero, a Boston University professor of religion. The title of the book is *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*. The author demonstrates convincingly that when it comes to religion, most Americans are illiterate. For example, according to recent polls the majority of Americans cannot name any of the four gospels. Instead of coming up with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the answers are: “Peter? Paul? Michael? Isaac? James?” Or simply: “I don't know.” High school seniors were asked: “What are Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible?” A large number answered: “Sodom is the husband, Gomorrah is the wife.” It gets worse. A few years ago no one in the audience of Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* – not a single person – could name a disciple of Jesus. There are twelve, but nobody could come up with a name. However, when Jay Leno asked, “What are the names of the Beatles?”, everybody shouted out: “John! Paul! George! Ringo!”

Part of my job as pastor is to help you become religiously and biblically literate. Why am I convinced that this is urgent for us? Two reasons. First, our personal faith is flimsy unless we have some knowledge. Second, religion matters in the world today. Socially, economically, politically, and militarily the entire planet is enormously influenced by religion. Think about the toppling of the statues of Buddha in Afghanistan, or the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City, or the civil wars in Sri Lanka and Darfur. To make sense of the world we must be religiously literate.

And so this summer I want to help you get acquainted – or reacquainted – with famous forgotten heroes in the Bible. Today our forgotten hero is Amos.

If I were to ask you, “What can you tell me about Amos?”, you might say, “Hmmm, Amos. I think I've heard of him, sort of.” Let's dig in to the Book of Amos, one of the most bracing books in all of Scripture. When I say “bracing,” I'm thinking about the old aftershave commercial, where the man slaps his face with aftershave and says, “Thanks! I needed that!” When we read Amos, we get slapped in the face, and we want to say, “Thanks, Amos! We needed that! We needed to be jolted into a vigorous, passionate, more active faith.”

What can we learn from Amos? For me he is the great example of the power of one. He believes that one person, with God, can change the world. One ordinary person.

I want to emphasize the word ordinary. Amos is not a celebrity. He is not a scholar. He is not a religious leader. He is not prominent in any way. He is simply a blue collar guy who takes care of animals and fig trees. He lives in what we would call the boondocks, down in the southern kingdom by the Dead Sea. He is from the back side of nowhere.

But one day it occurs to him that God's people have forgotten the way of integrity, the way of honesty, the way of basic morality. Especially in the northern kingdom there is bribery in the courts, cheating in the marketplace, and shallow, empty ritual in religion. Everybody knows that there is corruption in Israel, but nobody is willing to speak up. Nobody except for Amos.

We need someone like Amos here in Illinois. We know that every child should have an equal opportunity in the public schools, but in fact, children in wealthier communities have excellent schools. Children in poor communities do not. We know it's true, but we are silent, because we feel helpless to change the system.

"Hooray for Amos!" we say. He leaves his animals and his fig trees and travels to the royal sanctuary up north, where he boldly declares: "The Lord is setting a plumb line in the midst of God's people. The system is not working. The system is crooked and corrupt."

This is not a popular message in the year 750 B.C. The priest in charge of the royal sanctuary, whose name is Amaziah, goes ballistic. He tells the king: "Your majesty, we have a problem. His name is Amos." "Amos who? I've never heard of him." "He's a troublemaker from the desert down south." "Tell him to go home," says the king of Israel. "We don't listen to people who stir up trouble."

And so Amos is dismissed. He is ignored. He is sent home to his animals and his fig trees. No one pays attention, until 25 years later, when the nation of Israel is conquered by the Assyrians. Humbled and hurting, the people remember Amos. "We should have listened to Amos," they say. Eventually his words were included in holy scripture. Today, when you hear his name, you can think about the power of one, the power of one person to stand up for integrity and honesty and fairness.

Ninety-seven years ago a little girl was born in Alabama. Her father, a carpenter, was seldom at home. Her mother taught school and did hairstyling for extra money. At the age of 6 she was sent to a one-room schoolhouse where there were no desks, no windows, and almost no books. There was one teacher for 50 kids. At the age of 11 her mother had saved enough money to send her off to Montgomery, Alabama, to a private school. However, she did not graduate, because she got married as a teenager. Eventually she did receive a high school diploma, and for the next twenty years she worked as a seamstress. Like Amos, she had no impressive credentials.

But one day, when she was in her early 40's, she discovered the power of one. She was tired of the system that did not allow her people to benefit from excellent schools, the system that said, "If white people want to sit on the bus, you have to give up your seat." Finally, in the spirit of Amos, she said, "No." A Montgomery bus driver ordered her to get up, because a white man was having to stand. "No," she told the bus driver. And so he called the police. She was arrested, which led to a bus boycott for more than twelve months. You know the rest of the story. You may not know, however, that the street in Montgomery where she was arrested, Cleveland Street, has been renamed for her. The new name is Rosa Parks Drive.

Rosa Parks followed the way of Amos, believing that one person, one courageous person, with God, can change the world. We call it the power of one. "Here I am, Lord. Send me."