



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Change: Living Between Memory and Hope Part 2: Truth or Dare - Grappling with Denial”

Amos 7:1-13, John 8:1-11

Will Sparks November 3, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

The year is 745 BCE. The great kingdom of Israel has never been stronger, economically, militarily. They have never been more self-reliant. Every other period in their history, their independence was contingent on a foreign power. But now, under the great king Jereboim II, their territory has expanded, they are building, their arts community is thriving, they have a gorgeous temple around which the religious life is majestic and beautiful. The ruling class is wealthy. Life is good.

But there is an underbelly that the rulers and the wealthy cannot, or dare not see. Yes, the nation is wealthy, but not everybody in it. No, many are poor. The landless are poor. People who have lost connection with family, widows and orphans are desperately poor. In this unprecedented time of prosperity, there is also poverty.

In the midst of this time, a shepherd from the south starts to speak publicly. He starts to talk about the experience of the vulnerable in society. He speaks in the city square. He goes to Bethel, the very centre of royal power and royal religious life, and he cries out against the wealth of some while the hungry poor go without. He says.... And he says that in fact their religious observance is not only misguided, but God hates that kind of religion. Prayer without compassion is worse than no prayer at all. Sacrifice of the temple divorced from the sacrifice needed to feed the hungry is not pleasing to God. It is abhorrent to God. And, as we heard today, he says that God will not ignore it.

Well history has taught us over and over again that the role of prophet, the truth speaker, is a tough gig. And in Amos' case, he gets run out of town by the priest- the very guy who is supposed to protect the integrity of the faith. "We don't want to hear it!" We would rather practise a comfortable denial than an uncomfortable truth.

Last week I began a sermon series on change- the one constant in life- the one ingredient in life that you can always count on. And we are calling the series, "Living between memory and hope." In times of change we live in a liminal time between the way things were, and the way things are going to be. But not just that, living between the way we remember they were, and the way we long for them to be. You see there is a difference. It is not just things loving on. We could look at change as something simply to cope with, engaging whatever organizational and psychological strategies we can to manage change. But We are people of faith, and so we are not just managing change. No we are living between memory and hope- living, alive, perched between memory: not just the past, but our memory of it and all the past has meant to us, and hope: not just the future as it will be or is predicted to be, but the future as a fulfillment of God's dream for life- the Creator's dream for the creation. So we are coming at change, as I said last week, accepting life's impermanence, leaning into God in faith, and letting our imagination work on the changes we face.

Back to Amos, and his tangle with the priest of the day, Amaziah. Amos is calling for change. He is pulling an Al Gore and tossing an inconvenient truth into the public arena. In the process, he reveals the first stumbling block to change, our inclination towards denial.

Denial is that very human reaction to a truth that will hurt us. We all know it because we all do it at one time or another. A loved one dies suddenly and we can't believe it, won't believe it. We get the diagnosis and it doesn't feel real. The report comes in on the roof problem and the potential price tag is around a million dollars, and we say "No way! That's impossible. I can't believe that." Denial is a bred in the bone human reaction that makes total sense as a short term survival strategy. In the midst of rapid, disruptive change, denial actually helps us hunker down and get through the day. If you have ever felt numb after receiving news, that is denial at its best- the reaction that buffers us from the immediate impact of something.

However, as an adaptive longer term strategy, denial is deadly. As a response to real and lasting changes, changes that are not going to go away, changes that reach deep into our life, our society, changes that touch our soul, denial will not serve us- truth is the only way.

But as we saw with Amos, truth tellers are not always popular. It might have helped if Amos was a little less edgy with his truth. Jesus had his edginess, but when the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery before him, all puffed up and self-righteous, he was a little more subtle. He could have said, curse on all your houses you judgemental gits! What gives you the right to pass judgement on this woman? But no, he delivers the same truth slowly, drawing in the sand for a moment, looking up, saying "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." And then looking away, giving the truth a moment to settle in gracefully- giving them a chance to walk away- letting their denial of their own sin dawn gently.

You see the antidote to denial is one of the great tasks of the soul- waking up, awakening. And our resistance to awakening is that sometimes reality, the truth hurts. In the midst of change, there are always elements of the truth, the new reality that hurt. Even the birth of a child can be a change with biting elements. The new job means you have to move, and the truth is, that hurts. I am sure you can think of examples.

Last week at our congregational meeting about the property situation I noticed that as we worked our way through each of the options before us at this stage and asked ourselves with each, what excites us, what concerns us, what is the biggest change in this option, and what questions do we still have, most of the options did not illicit much excitement. And I guess that is not surprising. None of us want to be in this situation. We didn't choose this. In fact, we have good grounds for denial- every reason to not want this change to be real, to want to wake up from this dream and have it all go away. But actually, I see us starting to do quite the opposite- we are starting to wake up to the full significance of this situation. We are in the midst of a big change, and we are still figuring out the full truth of what it all means. Any way we cut it, we are facing a significant change.

But when we wake up in the midst of change, it is not just the painful truth that stares us in the face. No, the beautiful, graceful, poignant truth also comes alive. Yes, the roof situation is dire, but the leadership that is emerging is strong. Yes, there is water dripping in buckets between the chairs, but the community has a sense of humour and joy. Yes, the financial consequences of this are huge, but our mission, our holy purpose, the loving embrace we are here to participate in with God will not be brought to a halt. It just won't.

The end of denial, waking up hurts and heals at the same time. It opens our hearts. It is true here. It was true for Amaziah, for the Pharisees and scribes who walked away knowing better. It is true in all the changes in our lives. We are meant to live life awake, feeling the joy and pain, because God is found in both. As that wonderful hymn goes:

"Spirit open my heart to the joy and pain of living.

As you love may I love in receiving and in giving...

May I weep with those who weep, share the joy of sister- brother.

In the welcome of Christ, may we welcome one another. Spirit open my heart."

Amen.