

Enemies of the State (or of the Kingdom?)  
Amos 7:7-17  
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Maybe you've heard some of these names before: John Dillinger, Al Capone, Baby Face Nelson, Bonnie and Clyde, Ma Barker, Osama Bin Laden, each labeled as "public enemy number one" for the crimes they committed in their heyday. But have you heard of these enemies of the state?: Thomas Soerens, Greg McLeod, Albert Connette, and Amos of Tekoa? Well, three of them are sitting here tonight, and you may feel free to grill them over dinner as to why they are on my most wanted list. The fourth, Amos of Tekoa, won't be able to join us later for pizza, so I'll introduce you to him tonight.

Amos of Tekoa, as we hear him describe himself, was a shepherd and tender of fig trees in the southern kingdom of Judah, a regular guy outside the mainstream of activity in the royal court, and even life in the big city, who gets the call from God to be a prophet, a messenger bringing God's message of judgment. If that weren't enough, Amos is called to go north from his own land, to let Jeroboam, king of Israel, know that he has been falling down on the job of leading God's people according to the covenant God established with them. And Amos is faithful to his call to prophesy; he reminds Jeroboam and his inner circle that they trample the poor with a heavy boot, that they practice deceit by measuring out the grain of the farmers with intentionally inaccurate scales, that they traffic in human

suffering, buying the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. He charges them with corruption and complacency, a lack of compassion, and perhaps worst of all, to have the nerve to worship God and bring burnt offerings to the temple, all the while knowing the evil and idolatry that they have done. And so God has sent Amos to tell Jeroboam that the divine limit has been reached, that the lack of righteousness has consequences, and that the kingdom of Israel has no future. “See, I am sending a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.” With a visible sign, the plumb line used in construction that tells you whether you have built the foundation of the house square and true, Amos brings the message that the house of Jeroboam is leaning to one side, tilting so far that it is about to topple over, waiting only for the finger of God to give it that final little push.

And what does Amos’ faithfulness get him? Well, it gets him a visit from the high priest Amaziah, the professional, well-trained, certified, and official high priest, the kind of priest who does not take well to shepherds and orchard tenders bringing harsh words to his tender ears. And Amaziah tells him, in so many words, to go back to wherever it is that he has come from, that he has worn out his welcome, that he is now *persona non grata*, an enemy of the state. If we read between the lines, it is more than a simple request to go back home. There is an

implicit threat behind Amaziah's words; remember that he has first gone to the king to inform him that Amos is conspiring against him. And Amos replies with God's words to the violence of Jeroboam and Amaziah, both real and implied, that they will be the ones who will suffer from violence, and find themselves far from home and the divine presence.

So we see that Amos has become an enemy of the state, a threat to the status quo, a status quo that under the guise of legitimacy has systematically denied the intentions of God's creation and covenant. He is branded an enemy of the state because he has spoken out against the enemies of the kingdom, not the earthly kingdom of Jeroboam, but the heavenly kingdom of God. If that sounds a lot like a certain Jesus Christ whom we confess as Lord and Savior, then you've made the right connection, and you've remembered God's concern for the most vulnerable of the community, for whom the kingdom was created to serve. It is the kingdom of God which must be the object of our loyalty and faithfulness, a kingdom for which we must always be willing to become an enemy of the state. For the unfortunate truth is that if we are not an enemy of the state, we become an enemy of the kingdom, a status the consequences of which are dire to say the least.

I began by recalling some of the more infamous criminals of the last hundred years of US history, calling them "public enemy number one," but these are not truly enemies of the state, and we delude ourselves if we think they are our biggest problem. You see, Amos was not sent to prophecy against serial killers, or high

school shooters, or even Osama Bin Laden and the rest of the FBI's most wanted list. Those are the villains that are easy to spot, that do their damage out in the open, that make an event of their evil. These are the psychopaths and the deviants, evil incarnate to be sure, but not the subject of God's message through the prophet. No, God is concerned with the evil that lurks in the hearts of those with good intentions but weak resolve, concerned with the suffering caused by those with high aspirations, but a low tolerance for pain, concerned with the effects of decisions made by people with more power and prestige than wisdom and compassion. The Gregory McVeigh's of the world are a "one and done", but the racism of Apartheid lasted for decades. Organized crime is certainly a threat to a community, but its damage is nowhere as lasting and inescapable as a segregated neighborhood, or an under-funded elementary school.

So, it is not the overt enemies of God's reign that are the most dangerous. Rather, the most dangerous ones fall into two categories. The first are the Amaziahs of the world, men and women who by virtue of their position in society are assumed to have the best interests of all at heart, but who have traded that responsibility for either personal gain, or the ego strokes that come with their privileged position. In this category we find the clergy, the judges, the politicians, the police officers, the school principals and guidance counselors, and even the journalists, the kind of people you want to look up to and trust that they are looking out for the same people God is looking out for, the people many of them are

literally sworn to “serve and protect.” Ostensibly functioning in their roles as public servants, they more frequently act as gatekeepers for the status quo, deciding who advances, and who stays back, who is deserving or undeserving, who gets the special funding and who doesn’t. It doesn’t matter if they are black or white, men or women; gatekeepers and the maintainers of the status quo exist in every culture and society. They may not all look alike, but they have in common that they frustrate God’s plans for peace and community, sometimes intentionally, often unwittingly, but always at the expense of those without a voice.

The other class of the more dangerous of the enemies of God’s reign are those who should know better, but refuse to act, out of fear, prejudice, or indifference. These are the people who know injustice when they see it, both the obvious kinds and the harder to spot kinds of injustice, and, because they couldn’t be bothered, stand by and allow it to continue when they could have done something to stop it. The plumb line God showed Amos swings back and forth right in front of their noses, but they are too busy staring off into the distance or the future to see it. I’m going to tell on a story on myself about which I am not proud, but with the hope that it will illustrate how easy it is to become an enemy of the Kingdom rather than an enemy of the state.

As has probably happened to many of you, I was once called to jury duty, and probably also like many of you, I was hoping to be so far back in the line of potential jurors that I wouldn’t be needed, and thus be sent home quickly, or at

least receive a case that would be short in duration, so I wouldn't be stuck going to the courthouse for possibly weeks, and missing work and other obligations. But alas, it was clear that all of the assembled jurors would eventually be used, and so I resigned myself to serving, but began to think about how I could be as unappealing as possible to the lawyers on both sides, so that no one would want me to sit on their jury. Well, the time came for me to be considered for a case, and it turned out to be a murder case involving a black man accused of killing a white woman. So I, along with a couple of dozen potential jurors, heard the basics of the case and were called one by one to be examined by the attorneys from both sides to see if there were any reason to be disqualified. And so I am looking around and thinking, on the one hand, "Wow, everyone in this jury pool is white, and the defendant is black. How in the world is he going to get a fair trial?" and on the other hand, "Geez, a murder trial. This could take weeks!" Finally, it came time for me to be examined, and the lawyers from both sides asked if had any conflicts of interest which would prevent me from being impartial, and there I am struggling to find a way to come up with one, so I won't have to be there for weeks, and finally it occurs to me that all I need to do is state the obvious that I don't think this guy is going to get a fair trial because of the composition of the jury, and so I do it, I tell the lawyers that I think he has zero chance of being acquitted, and the next thing you know, the prosecution has dismissed me, and I am off back to the jury pool waiting to be called to the jury for the case of the overzealous bouncer, for which I

ended up serving for three days. But before I could get too far outside the door, the defense attorney catches up to me and rather sarcastically thanks me for making sure that his client *won't* get a fair trial, with perhaps the one person in the courtroom who actually gets it, copping out for his own convenience. In the end, I was a bigger threat to the Kingdom of God than that murder suspect even if he actually did pull the trigger.

Friends, we will know we are doing something right when the Amaziahs of the world take us aside, put an arm around our shoulder, and whisper in our ears, “Brother, I think you’d better be moving along. That’s not how we do it around here. You wouldn’t want something to happen to that pretty little face of yours.” That is when we know we have pushed a button that needs to be pushed, that we have recognized the real threats to God’s people, that we have crossed over from enemy of the kingdom to become an enemy of the state. Maybe you’ve never thought of yourself as an enemy of the state. That’s OK. You see, the problem isn’t that *you’ve* never thought of yourself that way, but rather if *no one else* has ever thought of you that way. The problem is when no one has had a chance to notice you, when no one else has seen you as a threat to their economic interests, when no one else has considered you as a danger to their political status. That’s when you have to take a good hard look in the mirror to see whether you are acting as one of those gatekeepers or those not-so-innocent bystanders, complicit in the threat to the kingdom, but never labeled as an enemy of the state. May we take advantage of the

plumb line that God still holds out for us, to see whether we are square and true in our faith and in our action, enemies of the state, one and all.