

"Brave Witness"
July 7, 2019
Stonewall-50th Anniversary
Amos 5:18-24

Amos to the People of Israel (approx.750 BCE):

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why do you want the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, not light;

as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I *despise* your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Here ends the text. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

The time is 750 years BCE—before the Common Era. That's 2700 years and change ago, in a land and setting far from ours. Amos of Tekoa in the Southern Kingdom of Judah is a fire and brimstone kind of preacher who feels empowered by God to call out the injustices of

the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He most likely is not wealthy or culturally privileged. He might be a herdsman or a dresser of sycamore trees for wealthy landowners. God's people are divided at this time in history, living under separate rulers in the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

The Book of Amos may have been written contemporaneously with the times, but more recent research suggests it was written 100-300 years later after the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Persians. The demise of Israel was believed to be a judgment from God due its poor social justice record. The clear message of the prophet is that the Southern Kingdom of Judah was soon to follow into ruin as a divine judgment for its oppression of the poor.

In any case, Amos presents a portrait of a powerful preacher, a prophet angry against those who abuse basic human rights. He accuses the Israelites of "selling the needy for a pair of sandals and trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth." (2.7) In this particular passage I had Don read to you today, Amos condemns worship and the spectacle of ritual when it becomes the primary reason for communities to gather in God's name; it is how we are outside the doors, how we love and treat our neighbor that matters most to God. Professor Julia Meyers O'Brien writes about Amos' message that "only when worship is matched with justice as powerful as torrents of water can it have any real value or meaning."

Fifty years ago, I was 12 going on 13 years old. I don't recall hearing about the Stonewall incident in New York City or the ensuing riot. I had no reason to know of them, living my little sheltered life in Hicksville, Colorado, aka Denver. I lived a comfortable, middle-class white, hetero-privileged existence in a carefully groomed and cocooned part of Denver, far away from any salacious or saucy nightclubs, men's clubs, or Negro juke joints. My parents saw to that, as did most of their contemporaries. I never knew about Stonewall until Julie started talking about it in preparation for her singing gig at Carnegie Hall, a massive undertaking of choral groups from all over the country in commemoration of its 50th anniversary.

By now in our service, you have heard the background of Stonewall. [For those of you reading, rather than hearing, this homily, a brief history: *From Quiet No More: A Choral Celebration of Stonewall:*

1969, Greenwich Village, a neighborhood that never followed the rules, where Sheridan Square is a triangle, West 4th Street crosses West 10th, and Waverly Place runs one way in three different directions.

On the north side of Christopher Street stands a low brick building with plate glass windows that are boarded up from the inside. You wouldn't think anything was there except for the huge vertical sign that reads, 'Stonewall Inn.'

The building has been there forever, but the latest club was opened a few years ago by a guy called Fat Tony. Everyone knows

he's associated with the *Genovese* crime family. He only opened Stonewall to make a buck from the fags, but hey, we take what we can get.

Some of the bars in the area lost their liquor licenses because the State Liquor Authority thinks being gay is the same as being disorderly. Fat Tony opened Stonewall as an 'Unlicensed Private Bottle Club' so he wouldn't need a liquor license. He's not supposed to sell booze, but he pays the cops to look the other way.

It's overpriced, past its prime, and attracts people who are too you, too loud or just way too much. But Stonewall also has a dance floor...

On the first night of the Stonewall uprising, the tactical police force tried to disperse the crowd by forming a human wall on Christopher Street and pushing the crowd west towards 7th Avenue. Instead of dispersing, the crowd ran around through the Greenwich Village side streets and re-gathered on Christopher Street, behind the police.

The police turned around and marched the newly formed crowd east, only to have the crowd circle around again and re-gather on Christopher Street, behind the police. This happened several times...

And from the History Channel, *Stonewall, 1969*:

Within minutes, a full-blown riot involving hundreds of people began. The police, a few prisoners, and a Village Voice writer barricaded themselves in the bar, which the mob attempted to set on fire after breaching the barricade repeatedly.

The fire department and a riot squad were eventually able to douse the flames, rescue those inside Stonewall, and disperse the crowd. But the protests, sometimes involving thousands of people,

continued in the area for five more days, flaring up at one point after the Village Voice published its account of the riots.

In 2016, President Barack Obama designated the site of the riots—Stonewall Inn, Christopher Park, and the surrounding streets and sidewalks—a national monument in recognition of the area's contribution to gay and human rights.]

The club was raided by police regularly that summer. The crime under NY Penal Law 235 regarding loitering was enforced against gay men, lesbian women, transvestites and drag queens. If the person wore three or more articles of clothing of the opposite gender (confirmed by intrusive and demeaning body checks by the officers), he or she could be arrested. If the bar patron was a person of color or was a street person, the odds of being arrested increased exponentially.

On the night of the Stonewall riot, the LGBTQ community fought back, quiet no more. It was a catalyst, if not *the* galvanizing, defining moment in LGBTQ political activism.

We are fifty years later in time, and we at UCC Parker Hilltop are Open & Affirming by declaration and by practice. We are 1 of 1400 UCC congregations that are ONA. Pretty impressive, right? Yet, we represent within a group of only 27% of all UCC churches. In our Rocky Mountain Conference, we are at 46% open and affirming, nearly twice the national average for all UCC churches. But we are far from unified.

Amos says in 750 BCE, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness an ever-flowing stream." 27%. I'm not very proud of that number. 46% is better, but still not just, not righteous. We have a long way to go. The history has been that society has always been stratified into the haves and the have-nots. Those with the gold set the norms; anyone who falls outside those norms have to fight and claw for basic human dignities.

I don't believe in a judgmental God; I think we destroy ourselves in our injustice. Other religious leaders disagree with me; some go, in my opinion, to ridiculous lengths to justify their power by claiming for their own agendas God's judgmental power. In 1978, Anita Bryant, the orange juice queen of Dade County, Florida, blamed a California drought on homosexuals.

Following the horrific events of Sept. 11, 2001, televangelist Pat Robertson, along with his conspiracy-theory-propagating evangelical buddy Jerry Falwell, reiterated past warnings while throwing other groups into the mix. On Sept. 13, 2001, Falwell, with an air of righteousness, proclaimed on Roberson's *700 Club* on the Christian Broadcasting Network:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, "You helped this happen!"

To this pronouncement Robertson responded, "I concur."

And in 2006, Rev, John Hagee, pastor of a Texas megachurch, gave this explanation for Hurricane Katrina in an interview on NPR:

New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they ... were recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area that was not carried nationally that there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. ... I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.

Ridiculous, right? Except recent estimates are that 25% of the adult population of the United States are fundamentalist evangelicals. By comparison, $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% of Americans are UCC church members, and only 27% of us are Open & Affirming. We stand against a tidal wave of oppression, folks. Our expression of God's unconditional love may be only a peep in the cacophony of American religious expression, but it is a peep that we must amplify whenever and wherever we can—in here and out there.

Those of us who are LGBTQ allies must be vocal and we must be authentic in both welcome and acceptance. There is no better way to honor what we believe about God and the Good News than to stand solidly with our queer brothers and sisters in faith. The Stonewall Uprising is a stark reminder that as far as we have come from the days

of Amos, we as a religious tradition are still as deeply divided as the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were. We are divided; the majority is the self-righteous oppressor of our day and the minority's duty-our duty- is to stand immovable, unshakeable, prophetic, and inspired.

It's hard and lonely work being a prophet, but...

May It Be So.