

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.21.25

Amos 8:4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (447)

This is a mouth house. In the case of Church on the Hill, this is literally true. Built in 1805, the meeting house of the Church on the Hill is the second oldest building in town and was indeed built for both church and town meetings. In the case of the Monterey church, this is more figuratively true, this the third meeting house of the church. Built in 1848, it was never strictly speaking a meeting house built for any purpose other than the church’s purposes. But it does stand in the tradition of the meeting house, the New England meeting house, the mouth house.

In German, the name is *mundhaus*. This, Martin Luther came up with as he reimagined what the church was to be. He found himself in the unlikely position of heading up what history would

come to call the Protestant Reformation. In 16th century Germany, Luther protested many of the practices of what would come to be called the Catholic Church, but which prior to this break would simply have been called the church or, if you must, the Western or Roman Church (as opposed to the Eastern Church, that of Constantinople or the Byzantine world.)

Luther had become increasingly scandalized by what seemed to him the far remove of the priesthood from the lives of regular people, and how this seemed to have removed the church itself from the people who were to be the church's primary concern—their welfare and happiness, the state of people's souls not only when it comes to the afterlife but also when it comes to the living of their days. The church was as a manager when it came to the people, managing the breach between God the Creator and the people of God's creating; and such a manager might forget that he's not to be in this for himself.

When you read the Gospel of Luke, you have to bear in mind that this gospel always bears in mind the eventual fact of the church. The church was not necessarily something Jesus bore in mind as he went about his earthly ministry. In the first half of the first century, during those decades of the incarnation, the Word of God made flesh in Jesus, the church wasn't an institution even yet imagined, and far less was "Christianity" understood as a new religion. But by the time "Luke," our gospel writer, would put word to parchment, the church had begun to form. By necessity, there came to be an organization gathered around the charge of the Holy Spirit to the people, that they bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, they pursue justice for the oppressed and declare the year of the Lord's favor for all that had life, that they might have it in abundance.

The fact of this eventual church is one Luke read backwards into the story he would tell, wrote backwards into Jesus' intent according to Luke. This would be an intent, though, on Jesus' part *not* that there might be a new religion unleashed unto the world (a world already replete with religions), but that there be a gathered body to enact the new age, the promised realm brimming with grace and peace. This church: it wasn't to represent a new religion, one among a bunch of other religions, but was to be post-religion, the way of living that isn't full of religious practices but is the fulfillment of religious practice, simply lived grace and peace.

The story doesn't quite play out that way, though. No, history would have its weird way with the church such that even those involved with its gathering life would fail to understand what it is to be and what it is not to be. It would become in many ways, perhaps even most ways, full of rites and rituals, hierarchy and vestments, pomp and circumstance and incense and architecture, a

religion, full stop—and one in which people, plain old people, would less and less have a place. It would need reformation every few centuries, if not more frequently—no less since the Protestant Reformation than before, a reforming for remembering what it's for, *whom* it's for.

It's just that it's so easy to identify with the powerful. Especially when the emperor comes along and grants you validity, recognizes you as a valid, legitimate player in the world of power politics. Constantine's favor for the early church, giving it valid footing in the Roman empire, was either the best thing that ever happened to the church, or the worst. Because it's just so easy to go along with that. Really, it's so much less appealing to identify with the debtors of this world, the people who have little but their indebtedness to the powerful, their inferiority and subservice to the master class.

Who wants to be in solidarity people like that? You only do that when you really have to.

This parable isn't one that presents us with models for Godly living. It's one that shows us what people who live in the world are like, how they use their wiles to get by, and how that shrewdness, their key to longer-term survival, might be a skill brought to the children of the light. It's a weird parable in which Jesus seems to be setting up as models people whose behavior is cynical at best and showing these models to the faithful, the goody-goodies who've come to follow him and to whom, in their pearl-clutching squeamishness, Jesus seems to saying, "Be a little more like these self-serving socio-political survivalists."

I can't say I *like* this parable. No one says they *like* this parable. This cynical look at how you build solidarity in this world of transaction and self-interest. This cynical admission of *why* you'd build solidarity in this world of survival of the fittest. You buy it. You figure out what's in it for the other person and you sell that to that other person at a low, low price, by which you save you own skin.

That's how it's done among the children of this age. So, what lessons might here be learned for the children of light?

Really, how do you bring the realm of light into the realms of this sorry old world? How do you appeal to this sorry old world with a vision of life and what it could *feel* like if we decided upon the better angels of our nature? How do you *sell* that in this world-wide marketplace of cheap stuff that falsely promise the world?

It's impossible to say whether Jesus ever had a notion of the church as becoming sold out to imperial pomp. It's impossible to say whether Jesus ever had a notion of the church being a political presence at all, a gathered body to such a historically real degree that they would become a

political force in the world where politics are inevitable. Somehow, in this world, in the playing out of history and the allocation of resources and the exercising of power to that end, politics are inevitable, and there are politics that are more just and politics that are less just, and any gathered body of people in this world will inevitably become a political presence, indeed perhaps even a political force—and it's impossible to say whether Jesus had a notion of any of this inevitability when it came, and comes, to those who follow in his way.

It's less impossible to say whether the gospel writer of Luke had a notion of any of this. Writing fifty, maybe seventy years, after Jesus lived and died and lived again, our gospel writer told the story he had to tell from fifty or so years into the life of the burgeoning church. He therefore perhaps remembered into long-past events, ones he wasn't present for, a sense of organizing that might or might have been consciously engaged among those who *were* there. He sees, he powerfully and faithfully imagines into those bygone early days, an organization taking seed that's only easily seen after the fact.

What's a wonder is how both Jesus and Luke imagined that the church would become beholden to a powerful master that bore little resemblance to the one it was to serve, neither the people nor their God but rather powerful worldly players—such that this icky parable would need to be imagined and told. The church would take seed and would grow. The church would become beautiful and appealing and eventually powerful for all the people involved in it. The church would gain the appreciation of the emperor. The church would become a tool of the empire, of many empires, itself become something of an empire, though always one without an army so it could maintain a stance of plausible deniability. And it would, time and again, through the ebbs and flows of historical tides, ever and again curry to keep that footing—until at last, at long last, at least in the global north, there came an historical moment when it would seem that footing was lost forever, is lost forever.

Christendom is dead.

The church is a faint shadow of what it once was.

....

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the two mouth-houses where I get to mouth off, where we're all allowed and empowered to mouth off. The history of these *mundhauses*, whether any particular mouth-house is so literally or figuratively, is a rich vein of liberty. The encyclopedic definition helps here: Luther's mouth-house came, a century later in colonial New England, to

generate the meeting house, a place built in “emphasizing that God’s word and God’s salvation is an acoustical affair... In American Puritan and Congregational churches, their church buildings are termed mouth-houses to signify their purpose as places of public meeting and expression, augmenting their use as places of worship. Old South Meeting House in Boston [for example], termed a mouth-house, was the site of public debate about the American Revolution, the planning of the Boston Tea Party, as well as debate on the issues of slavery, Abolitionism, and [eventually even] the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War.”

In even more recent days, like this very last week, as the voices of the elite are either silenced or are the ones doing the work of silencing, Sarah Longwell has had this to say. Publisher of *The Bulwark*, an online media group that formed of Republicans who’d come to be called “Never Trumpers,” she said in a podcast on Friday with her “best friend,” JVL, Jonathan V. Last: “The institutional surrender has been so complete... In terms of the media companies, they have been some of the worst actors...CBS & ABC, they’re not just capitulating to Trump. They are looking for ways to be more on side with him. The same way that Bezos and Zuckerberg and Elon, I mean, the extent to which his allies and converted allies are now going to own the vast majority of the country’s legacy and mainstream media... And not just the media but the media streams and platforms... The level of corruption, using the power of the state; the level of capitulation...”

And in response, in thinking of what this will mean for the likes of them—these who are not leftist Democrats but who moreover aren’t capable, in terms of their own integrity, of joining with those currently so shamelessly wielding state power at the expense of people and their right to mouth off, indeed people and their need to mouth off, to say honestly what’s on their minds: “We need to get over ourselves,” JVL said. “We need to get over ourselves and be in solidarity with everyone.”

This dinky iteration of the church; this street-corner, village center, top of a hill, nearly emptied out iteration of the church: we are one place where speaking out cannot be silenced. We have no financial interests, no powerful connections. We have neither ego nor vanity nor high stakes at risk. That time for us is over. That day for us is done. These days, as we are indeed so faint a shadow of what we once were, we should have no illusion of whom we’re to be for, with whom we are to stand in solidarity. If ever our (let’s admit it) unimpressive meeting houses managed to suggest to us otherwise, if ever we were confident in what dignity and respectability we had about ourselves, in the admiration, and perhaps even envy, we held in the eyes of those who

are not us, we really can't be so deluded anymore. We are plain. We are old. And we have nothing to lose if we don't shut up.

If ever our rapt gaze was on the glittering of the world, if ever our loyalty was to those who exercise aggressive power in the world, it's time now to get wise and see where real power lies, where power meets with goodness, where power meets with justice. God stands in solidarity with the poor of the land, and if we want to know God then we should search amidst those encampments, make our homes indeed among those encampments. The world's power-broking managers will not save us—from tyranny, from authoritarianism. It comes rather to us, we who are nobodies and therefore free to be anybody and so numerous could come to be nearly everybody.

We gather in our little laboratories of liberty, these wooden preaching boxes, these plain old mouth-houses. Bless them that they might bless us and that we might then be a blessing unto this world, a blessing of freedom and courage as the Lord would have us be.

Thanks be to God.