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Proper 21
Meditation: The Great Reversal
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Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
Luke 16:19-31

There once was a certain CEO of a successful production company.
Every Friday evening, to celebrate the end of another work week,
she rounded up her kids and husband,
loaded up the car,
and they all went out to their favorite Italian restaurant for
fresh pasta, warm crusty bread dipped in the richest of olive oils, and roasted garlic.
The kids were always treated to a cannoli for dessert,
and the parents to a glass of deep, red Tuscan wine.

Working in the CEO's factory was a poor woman named Ramona
who needed to be able to put food on the table for her children and husband,
and who longed for even just a few hours in the evening to enjoy being with her family.
Instead she worked double shifts,
never had quite enough to get through the month,
and rarely saw her children
outside of sneaking into their rooms when she returned home late at night
to watch them sleeping.

When time came for the great wedding feast of the lamb,
Ramona took her place at the luxuriously bedecked table
filled with overflowing platters of the richest food
and brimming goblets of the finest wine.
Her family sat with her and they laughed together,
enjoying the revelry and abundance of time, food and celebration.

The CEO sat in the adjoining room.
The lights, shadows and sounds of the party next door
wafted in and danced on the darkened walls.
She could see Ramona and her family gaily feasting.
She could see Ramona for the first time.
She'd never met Ramona before,
never knew that Ramona had worked for her,
and hadn't a clue about Ramona's life of struggle.

She had only just learned about Ramona's story...
and so many others.
She curled on the floor and sobbed,
having just encountered—for the first time—
each person, each family—
whose earthly lives had intersected intimately with her own—
who had struggled, suffered and experienced brokenness.
Each burst of laughter from the feast shot through her body
and emerged again as wails.

Though the door was open,
the feast abundant,
and unoccupied chairs aplenty,
she couldn't even imagine crossing into the other room and joining in the party.
For in life, she just learned, she had helped create a chasm between herself and Ramona,
and chasms that wide were difficult, painful to bridge.

The CEO had been full and now was empty.
Ramona had been empty and now was full.

I know of a preacher who receive criticism from her congregation
for preaching too much about social and economic justice.
She shared with me her bafflement—
as long as I'm expected to preach from the gospels,
she mused,
I don't really have much of a choice.
Look at what I'm working with here!

I was thinking of her again while preparing this sermon,
wondering how the *guest* preacher is going to be received
if she comes bearing a challenging word related to social and economic justice.
But I didn't pick this parable—the lectionary did!
And I didn't tell it in the first place—Jesus did!
And while I re-wrote a modified version, I didn't write the original—Luke did!
I can't be held solely responsible, folks...
Look at what I'm working with here!

As you may have noticed,
my version of the parable changes up the image of the afterlife presented by Luke's telling.
I felt free to do that because I feel pretty certain that Jesus told this parable
not for the sake of telling us precisely what the afterlife will be like,
but for the sake of revealing how we ought to live this earthly life...
how we are *freed* to live this earthly life.

In other words, I think this parable is about how we live vs. what happens when we die; it's about life rather than death.

When the rich man wants Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house, in order to warn his five brothers, Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." In telling this parable, Jesus teaches— he *reiterates*— that God's message of how we ought to live is unchanging through the ages. God's call on our lives is ancient. God's invitation for God's people is clear and consistent.

We don't have time to review *all* of "Moses and the prophets" this morning, but we have been given a sampling from one of the prophets. Listen again to this tasty morsel of prophetic fervor from Amos.

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.
Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Part of what strikes me from this excerpt from Amos is that his warning is for those who are "at ease" and who "feel secure," for those who do not grieve at the plight of the oppressed.

It certainly calls into question for me our nation's project of seeking ease and security. Especially in a post-9/11 world, security has become our number one promised land, bolstered by a "wall" at our southern border, red-level airport threats and recession bonuses for frightened bank execs and oil tycoons. And we need only look at the grocery store aisle of prepared foods or our fascination with celebrity vacations lounging next to Caribbean pools to see how we collectively worship at the foot of the lesser god of ease. Ease and security have become our singular goals. But more than that, they have become our masters— dictating our every move and enslaving us to unhealthy patterns.

I recently heard a story about author James Heller, who had been thrown a party by a billionaire,

who certainly lived a life of relative ease and financial security.
A reporter talked with Heller and pointed out that the billionaire host of his party
made more profit off his hedge funds in one day
than Heller made from his classic book, *Catch-22*, in a lifetime.
What do you think of that? asked the reporter.
Heller responded with something along these lines:
I have something that he will never have, he said.
What's that? asked the reporter.
Enough.

Part of what makes ease and security such crafty little buggers
is that we never quite get there.
Somehow each of them manages to stay *just* out of reach...
just beyond one's fingertips...
just a little ahead on the horizon.
We could always get a little more secure.
And things could always get a little easier.
The destination always eludes us.

And this is when it's important to get a bit more personal—
time to resist the temptation to make someone or some system *outside* myself the bad guy.
This isn't just an American culture thing;
it isn't just a thing of American corporate greed.
Amos' prophetic proclamation calls into question *my own* longing for ease and security.
I am not somehow immune to the pull of ease and security,
and I doubt many of you are either.

It comes into clearer focus for me when I consider that Amos' witness
essentially calls us to unease and insecurity...
a call to live uneasily and with a healthy dose of insecurity,
so that we may live with enough.
I may not be the one inventing new airport screening technologies
to digitally undress anyone who wishes to board a plane,
but I sure do look for other ways of being secure.

Like this: putting money aside for retirement.
I wonder what happened to Jesus' 401K after he died?
Who do you suppose he'd designated as his beneficiary?.....hmm.

Now, I'm under no illusions that I am Jesus—
that's to be certain.
And I know that plenty of good respectable Mennonites assure me that
it is just good stewarding of my resources to plan for the future.

Maybe.

And I've got my retirement savings with MMA-soon-to-be-Everence,
so at least I can be assured that that money of mine
is being invested in a socially responsible manner.

So that's great, right?

Except that last time I checked, MMA was invested in Coca-Cola,
and last I knew the Mennonite Church of Colombia has asked that Mennonites
across the globe join them in a total boycott of Coca-Cola
since Coke officials have employed local paramilitary thugs
for the past several decades

to both intimidate and *dispose of*

those who have dared to organize for better working conditions.

From time to time,

small Colombian communities go out to the Opon River to find the body of a beloved
son or daughter floating downstream.

Another casualty for a refreshing carbonated beverage.

Socially responsible investing?

Maybe not.

I just can't be certain that my retirement savings is free of this lust for security
that both Amos and Jesus warn against.

Nor can I be certain that it isn't at the expense of those I cannot see,
and will not meet,

until we've all gathered for that great wedding feast of the lamb.

But I'm not here to bash the good efforts of others,

or to presume that I have the answers.

I'm here to hear these challenging prophetic words from Jesus and from Amos,
and to explore what it all means for my life.

To dig just a little deeper than what seems apparent at the surface.

I'm not sure of answers—and that's why we do church *together*
and not alone in our bedrooms at home—

so that we can find our way through the murkiness together.

In our parable for this morning, Jesus points to the prophets as a guide for living.

He therefore points to this direct and uncompromising message of Amos
as he tells a tale of a great reversal.

She who is full now will be empty when God's Reign is realized.

She who is empty now will be full.

The parable is simply Jesus' beatitudes in story form.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, during the sermon on the plain,

Jesus said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh...
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep..."

Reversal, reversal, reversal,
there will be a Great Reversal.
God's Reign will flip things topsy-turvy on their heads.
Ramona and Lazarus
and all the last, the lost, the least,
will feast and laugh; laugh and feast.
Every tear shall be wiped from every eye,
every burden made light.

As I ponder Jesus' teaching of the Great Reversal,
in both its expository and narrative forms,
in both his sermon and his story,
I can't help but think that I'm pretty sure I'm getting set up for a topple vs. an upgrade.
I think I might just be on the wrong side of these earthly scales...
the side of the scales that will be on the tumbling end of the Great Reversal.
What to do about that?

As Christians, we believe that God's Reign has already been initiated by Jesus.
We believe that Jesus' life, death and resurrection hailed the start of God's Reign.
And we believe that we are called to follow in the Way of Christ
as we together *realize* God's Reign in our world.
We are agents of realizing God's Reign for all the world.
And so we are not powerless in all this.
We aren't supposed to sit around and feel bad about the ways in which we are privileged
and do nothing more.
We are, rather, *empowered* by the Holy Spirit to do the work of leveling,
of justicing
so that the Great Reversal will not be so dramatically painful
for those who are promised a Great Topple when it all goes topsy-turvy.

Now's the point in the message when Mennonites start to think that
we'll just get right to work then, and bring the Reign of God

right here
right now.
Let's get it done.
Draft a vision statement, organize a few committees,
bake a few pies to sweeten the deal,
get down to work and make it happen.
We should be able to knock this thing out in just a few days
if we all do our part.
Yes?

That impulse to think it all depends on us
brings me to a wise sage who helps me to keep perspective.
Soon-to-be-assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador wrote these
oft-quoted words:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime
only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work...
This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one-day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders;
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

In other words, I am not suggesting that we put our trust in ourselves.
We are, like the princes in the Psalm, mere mortals.
Let there be no mistaking: it is God who does this work...
in us,
through us,
in spite of us.
It is God who sets the table and ensures there's room for *all*.
It is God who will introduce us to all
whose earthly lives have been intimately connected with our own,
whether we knew them or not.

It is God who will be present as we weep and grieve the brokenness that we contributed to,
and as we celebrate and rejoice in the ways we embody and enacted God's Reign
for our earthly neighbors.

It is God who redeems each of us,
and calls each one by name.

Happy are those whose help
and whose hope
is God.

Let's turn to our God in prayer:

O God, save us from our paralysis in the face of oppressions and injustices.

Save us from our complacency in the face of disparities and tragedies.

Give to us the gift of uneasiness when confronted with this world's brokenness.

Show us again your vision of The Great Reversal.

Honor us with the opportunity to be a worker in your unfolding Reign,

to be agents of your justice, mercy and love

on earth as it shall be at the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

In the name of our great Teacher, Friend and Lord,

Jesus the Christ,

Amen.

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

6:1a Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.

6:4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;

6:5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music;

6:6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

6:7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Psalm 146

146:1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

146:2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

146:3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

146:4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

146:5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,

146:6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

146:7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free;

146:8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

146:9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

146:10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Luke 16:19-31

16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

16:20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

16:21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

16:22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

16:23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

16:24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.'

16:25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'

16:26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

16:27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house--

16:28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

16:29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'

16:30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

16:31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"