**Soul Deaf**

A homily by The Rev. Chris Wendell

For the 6th Sunday after Pentecost: July 21, 2019

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, Massachusetts

The only thing bringing more heat than the sun today, is the rhetoric of the prophet Amos in the Old Testament lesson. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible are known for the intensity of their direct diatribes against the moral failures of God’s people. But today Amos is really letting God’s people have it. He tells them that God is done with them because of their disobedience to the will of God. In particular Amos is calling out: the financial schemes of their merchants that further impoverish those already poor, the wasting of excess food resources by the wealthy, and the general willingness to abandon the limits on pursuing their own self-interest, which God has set for their own good. He describes a society in which the individual pursuit of happiness has completely overtaken the work of discerning and living out God’s will for all humanity.

But what is so striking to me about Amos’ warning in his 8th chapter, is how he describes what the consequences will be of failing to try and make our will look more like God’s will. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.” If we give up the practice of trying to do God’s will, of trying to distinguish between God’s will and our own; if we begin to live as if God’s will does not exist, and there is only our own desires to guide us; then the consequence will be that we will no longer be able to discern God’s will. We will lose the ability to hear God’s word speaking to us. This is NOT the same, as God choosing not to speak. Rather it is that our choice to not hear for so long, will make us deaf. Not deaf in the ear, for we will hear our own desires only too well. But deaf in the soul, which will no longer be able to hear God calling to us. Amos finds this prospect not only dangerous, but a moral tragedy.

Now, the social sins of humanity, the distance between our collective reality and the reality God desires for us, belong not just to the time of Amos, but to every age of God’s people. As is the case whenever we hear the prophets calling the people of God to repentance, we cannot help but bring to mind the particularities of our own collective disobedience to God, about which the prophets of our times seem to continuously cry out. They decry the sin of inhospitality. The inhospitality of an affluent nation that seems perennially unable to create sensible, humane and just immigration policies, and the inhospitality of local communities here in Eastern Massachusetts that so often reject affordable housing development for the poor already among us. They decry the sin of racism. Racism in the tweets of our leaders, and in the reluctance of many white people to even begin talking about some kind of reparations program for the economic legacies of slavery. They decry the sin of violence: our failure to be true peacemakers – to bring reconciliation through transformation and growth – reconciliation among nations, in local communities, even within our own families.

Our ears certainly are not deaf to these cries. The Amoses of our day are quite loud. But what about our souls? Are they not becoming deafer by the week? Is our weariness and the persistence of our social sins not making it harder and harder to hear God’s clear voice speaking to us, calling to us, revealing God’s will to us? It sure feels that way to me sometimes. There are times when I feel like simply letting our social sins be someone else’s problem to solve. They’re too complicated to sort through, too emotional to wade into, the consequences aren’t that bad, and they demand too much vulnerability.

But the flaw of this moral reasoning here is easy to expose, and it is the same flaw that Amos is pointing out. It is the flaw of self-centeredness. Of seeking our own will before seeking the will of God. Take each justification for avoiding the wider moral questions of our day that I just named and add “for me” after each of these defenses. It’s too complicated for me. Too emotional for me. Too inconsequential for me. Too vulnerable for me. But it’s not too vulnerable, too emotional, too inconsequential or too complicated for God and God’s will.

At the heart of living the Christian life is the work of distinguishing between our own desires and will, and God’s desires and will – and then doing something about it.

If you are getting soul-deaf amidst the ethical challenges of our common life, local and beyond; If you are finding it harder to hear God’s voice, or maybe even to remember to listen for it. If you are worried that we are now deeply within the famine that Amos predicts. Take heart.

God has not stopped speaking. We have just stopped hearing. Sit again at the Lord’s feet, and listen to what he is saying. Nourish yourself again in the word. As much of it as you can take. By yourself, with others, in church, in the world. Then pray: thy kingdom come, thy will be done. And mean those words. Then act. Act clumsily or awkwardly, but act for God’s will, not your own. And then know that you are living the Christian life, as you sort through what is your will and what is God’s, and then do something about it. Amen.