“Character-Formation!”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Amos 5:21-24

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Sometimes we just don’t measure up. Sometimes we disappoint. We disappoint our spouse, our boss, our church, our kids; sometimes our friends expect more from us. Sometimes God expects more from us, better from us. Remember this one? “Good, better, best, never let it rest, until the good gets better and the better gets best!”

In 8th grade, Porter French was my Confirmation Class teacher. Before this, I knew Porter French to be an “exception to the rule,” an eccentric to most of the small-town Iowans around me. Singing hymns on Sunday mornings, if he felt the organist wasn’t playing the hymn fast enough, Porter would sing a full measure ahead of everyone else, and very loudly. When he was 71, Porter bicycled alone over 700 miles, from Grinnell, Iowa to his 50th College Reunion in eastern Kentucky. In his former life, Porter had been a Prison Chaplain. No surprise—he was a bear of a man, at 6’5”, 250lbs. So Porter was the ideal Sunday school teacher for a bunch of slacking, disrespectful 7th-8th graders. On one particular Sunday morning, fed up with us, Porter slammed his Bible down on the table, looked us straight in the eyes and shouted, “No messin’ around anymore; you need to decide right now. You need to decide if Jesus Christ is real or not; if He’s worth following or not. Until you decide, I’m not gonna waste my time on you!” Porter left the room. I wasn’t, we weren’t measuring up. Porter French was expecting more from us.

God sends us Prophets when we’re not measuring up, when more is expected of us. These Messengers of God are sent to shake things up, to confront us and challenge us. God sends Prophets to speak truth in love to us, in hopes that we might wake up, measure up, and make our way back to God! Amos is no exception.

Unlike most prophets, Amos wasn’t a priest or religious scholar; he was actually more of a man’s man. He was a rough outdoorsman, herding sheep and harvesting sycamore timber! Amos lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II, the same time as the prophets Hosea and Jonah. Seven hundred and sixty years before the Savior’s birth, Amos lived just a few miles outside of that “Little Town of Bethlehem.” For Israel it was a time of prosperity and wealth; thus, it was a greedy, self-indulgent time! Life was comfortable and easy for the Israelites, so who needed God, anyway?! Enter Amos, who was intensely burdened by the complacency and
corruption of his people. His name actually translated, means “burden-bearer.” “Woe to those who are complacent in Zion, who think this is the good life.” “Woe to those who live in luxury and expect to be waited on hand and foot” (6:1 & 4). They weren’t measuring up. God wanted more from His chosen people.

In the best known passage of Amos, God has some harsh words to say about their empty, hollow worship and their disregard for the Lord. Chapter 5:21-24:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I can’t stand when you get together to worship (it’s empty, insincere). Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. (in other words, “it’s only lip-service you offer me.”) ... Away with the noise of your worship and songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But, instead (if you really want to honor me, and are serious about following me) let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (The Message).

God expects more from us. Throughout Amos, more than anything, God is talking about character, character-formation. You know, the ethical and moral qualities—the heart and soul qualities in us—that people see in me or in you. Character is who I am and what I do in private when no one is looking. If you want to know my character, how I measure up, ask the people closest to me. Ask my wife, my daughters, my colleagues, my friends. Ask them to describe my attitudes, convictions, behaviors. Where am I like Christ, and where am I still coming up short? Do you have true character … Or are you “just a character”?

God used Amos to wake the people up to a “good-better-best” life, a fuller life of giving God more. So this is how I want to handle Amos today. I want to suggest three character-forming actions we can work on, only by God’s GRACE, of course! Three actions, with the Holy Spirit’s help! Three actions of measuring up: Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal. Think about attending to one of these this coming weekend.

First, the character-forming action of REFLECTION, of reflecting on God. The Israelites of Amos’ day were living lives of “divided loyalties.” It’s what James calls a life of “double-mindedness”—it’s an unsettled life “like a wave in the ocean that is blown and tossed by the wind” (1:6). It’s a life that is conflicted between good and evil, right and wrong. Since it is
Father’s Day, for a man it could be a life that is divided between his obligations to his wife and kids verses his desire to advance his career. It could be a life torn between his need for security and stability verses his hungry appetite for excitement and risk. For some of us it could be a life that is so overwhelming, with so many things up in the air, that it’s not much of a life at all, except for a lot of fear, anxiety. A life divided is a life beaten down by the waves, tossing in the wind.

Jesus’ remedy for a life divided? “Seek first the Kingdom of God.” It’s Jesus’ invitation to put first the training of our minds and the tuning of our hearts towards God by reflecting on God. It’s spending time daily tasting and savoring God’s Word. It’s having conversation with God; it’s being still and spacious enough to find yourself falling in love with God and God’s Word!

What is the fruit of daily reflecting on God? Here is what can happen (with God’s grace helping us). Imagine that your first thought for the person in the car next to you, or in the checkout line, or the drive-thru is not “You Bleep!Bleep!Bleep!”, but to pray for her or to bless him. “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly,” Paul says (Colossians 3:16). Here’s what can happen. Men, you are looking at another woman, besides your wife. Imagine looking at that woman and seeing her not as “umm, umm, ummm,” but seeing her as if she were your sister or your own daughter—honoring, respecting that woman instead. “God’s Word is inspired and is useful in doing every good work…”(2 Timothy 3:16-17). Think about that enemy of yours. Imagine genuinely wishing your “enemies” well. Christ-like character is formed when you and I spend day-by-day, intentional moments reflecting on God and God’s Word.

Second, the character-forming action of REPENTANCE. Amos spends most of his book pointing out to the people their unrepentant heart. Repentance is the ongoing process of “turning around” or “turning away” from the harmful or unhealthy things that keep us from relationship with God and each other. Repentance is that regular habit of consciously “turning” to God, talking straight with God about what’s broken inside, and asking God for the strength to actually do something about it! Do you remember the humble tax collector in Luke’s Gospel? Jesus points to him as the model of a truly repentant soul? “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Here’s how Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a Prophet of today?) describes a truly repentant person:

“You are a sinner (I am a sinner), a great, desperate sinner; now come as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you.  God wants you as you are; God does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; God wants
you alone. (“Give me your heart,” God says.) God has come to you to save the sinner. Be glad! This message is liberation through truth. You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear (with others) will do no good before God. He wants to see you as you are....You do not have to go on lying to yourself and to your brothers (and sisters), as if you were without sin; (Be glad!) you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but hates the sin” (Life Together, p.111).

Face your shortfalls and failings. Name what is binding you, enslaving you. Tell God your intention to deal with the sin; ask for His power and strength to do so. Confession is naming it; but better yet, regular repentance is asking God to actually help you do something about it! Do you have that one friend (or professional) who will hold you boldly in prayer and hold your feet to the fire? Do you have a working plan for tackling what ails you? Bonhoeffer is saying, be confident in Christ’s loving-kindness and strength, and be glad and get to it!

Third, the character-forming action of RENEWAL. Amos’ greatest critique of his fellow Israelites was that their “worship” of God was a going-through-the-motions, self-focused kind of worship. Their lives didn’t honor God! Paul, on the other hand, instructs us in Romans, “Take your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life (take your whole life) and give it to God as an offering” (12:1-2). “Presenting ourselves as living sacrifices” is all about arranging our ordinary lives around daily practices, and steady relationships, and experiences through which we “worship” God. As we live in God-honoring ways, God RENEWS us!

How wonderful it is that God solely desires to make us “new” again and again, every day! This is the kind of life I want! So here are some practices through which God can makes us new. Pick a couple of these. Keep all electronic devices out of the bedroom at night, so that you and I have a fighting chance of a more satisfying sleep. A good sleep changes everything for the day ahead! Take that daily early morning walk, or early evening walk to increase the heart rate, burn calories, and sweat out toxins. Exercise your mind with reading or puzzles that would stimulate and stretch you. Or, warm your heart by enjoying two hours every week with a good spiritual companion. Or feed your soul with an engaging group of trusted friends who study, pray, or serve together. More than anything, worship alone or with others, like right now, as often as you can. Honor God by your spiritual offerings, and you will be renewed!
On God’s behalf Amos came to convict, then show the people a “good-better-best” life, a life worth living. Eight centuries after Amos, for our sake, God sent His Son. Which one of these three might you commit to this week, God’s grace making it possible: Daily reflecting on God and God’s Word; regular, intentional Repentance; or everyday Renewal through ordinary practices and relationships? We are a people called to glorify God. We are a people called to love and honor Jesus—to love and honor the One who has come that we might have life, and life in abundance!