

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 22, 2019**

**Amos 8:4-7 • Psalm 113 • 1 Timothy 2:1-7 • Luke 16:1-13**

There are certain words that we seem to use only in church. Quite often they refer to the items we use in worship. We have cinctures, cruets, chasubles, copes, canticles, cassocks, censers, etc. And sometimes they refer to ideas and concepts. Salvation, redemption, sanctification, divinization. These words are often baffling to people who are new to Christian theology and, let's be honest, those of us who are not new to it. When he was the presiding bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson once suggested that preachers should get around this language barrier by using ordinary language. So instead of using the word "gospel," he suggested, just say what the gospel actually is. As you can imagine, this was reported in some circles as, "Bishop tells Lutheran clergy to stop preaching the gospel."

Today I want us to think a little bit about one of those churchy words: "justification." We often say that we are "justified by grace through faith." And we probably have some idea what faith is (trust) and some idea what grace is (gift). But what does it mean to be justified?

One place we use the word "justify" is when we're lining things up on a page. When we justify something, we bring it into alignment. So if you want to imagine what it means to be justified, it means that God is here, we are over here, and God brings us into alignment. That's a fine definition, but it's a little mechanical.

So let me give you another way to think about justification. A justification is an explanation. If you say that someone can justify their behavior, you mean there's a reason for their behavior. When we try to justify an opinion we have, we're trying to gather the evidence to show we're correct. Justification involves proving to other people that you are in the right, that you belong, that you deserve their recognition.

Now we all have to justify ourselves in various ways. If you're a high schooler who is applying to college and you fill out an application, you have to justify your request for admission. These are my grades. If you are an employee somewhere and you ask for a raise, you have to have justify the increase. This is how much work I do. If you are a parent and you dispense advice, you have to justify your expertise. I used to be your age. This is all perfectly fine and normal life.

What's more troubling is a growing sense many of us have that we don't just have to justify our application or promotion or counsel, but that we actually have to justify ourselves. That simply being in the world as the people we are is something we need to justify. If we want people's respect, if we want their recognition, if we want them to acknowledge who we are, we better have a good argument to persuade them with. Today's reading from Amos is about that struggle for justification. It's about a group of people who want to justify their place in the world, and who go about it in exactly the wrong way.

A little bit of context for you. Amos was a prophet who lived in the eighth century BC. And he lived during a time of peace and prosperity. The Israelites are becoming wealthy, they don't have to fight any wars, they have everything they could ever want. This, they imagine, is what God always wanted for them. Things have never been better. Amos has a different take on what's going on. Amos says that things are going horribly. Because we have a lot of wealthy people who are doing great, but they are creating wealth by exploiting their neighbors. Amos is asking us to think about the economy. And when I say "economy," I don't mean the stock market or the GDP. Amos is thinking in broad terms about how we ascribe, store, and trade value.

In today's reading, Amos tries to get into the head of the in these well-off Israelites. And he does it by describing their thoughts as they honor the Sabbath. You work six days and then you get

777 Wyckoff Avenue Wyckoff, NJ 07481  
adventlutheranwyckoff.org • (201) 891-1031

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to rest on the Sabbath. But do these Israelites like Sabbath? No. They hate it. They're counting down the minutes until it's over. They should be resting, but instead they're restless.<sup>1</sup>

What's the problem? What keeps them from resting on the Sabbath? It's their sense that they aren't enough, that something is missing. When the Sabbath comes around, they can't stand it. Because it means you have a day when you can't trade, you can't sell, you can't make a profit, you can't get ahead. You have to just be. "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain?" they ask, "and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?" Let's get it over with already.

About three thousand years later, what keeps us from resting? What keeps us from a sense of wholeness and peace, what the Hebrew scriptures call *shalom*? At the heart of that is a similar fear that we're not really enough. A sense that we have to justify ourselves, our existence, our livelihoods to other people. That inkling feeling that we have to prove ourselves over and over and over again. We have to prove that we are good partners. We have to prove that we are good friends. We have to prove that we are good employees, neighbors, parents, citizens, etc. etc. You could always be doing better. And you could always be doing more.

This would be bad enough by itself. A kind of anxiety constantly running in the background of our lives. What makes it worse is the idea that we are a meritocracy and that people get what they deserve based on their talents and abilities. And no matter what we do, there's always someone else who could do it better. And so we have no choice but to constantly justify our place in the world. There is no time for rest, no time for reflection, and, perhaps worst of all, no time for gratitude. If you're not looking ahead, you're falling behind.

Earlier this month, *The Atlantic* published an article by George Packer about navigating his kids through New York City's education system.<sup>2</sup> It recounts the almost comical lengths Packer and his wife went through to get their kids in a physically safe, racially diverse, academically rigorous school so that they would be set up for a successful life. In Packer's mind, his kids are blithely unaware of all the machinations going on behind the scenes. That changes at dinner one night when his ten year old daughter remarks, "If you fail seventh grade you fail middle school, if you fail middle school you fail high school, if you fail high school you fail college, if you fail college you fail life."

If that's true, if life is just a series of steps that you can't mess up without dire consequences, then every single moment of every day is an opportunity. It can be maximized. It can be monetized. You can rest, but only so you can work better later. Nothing has any value in and of itself. It's only a means to some other end, a credential to prove our value, or a symbol to communicate something about ourselves.

What is the effect of those attempts to justify our own existence? Amos' primary concern is that it's civically ruinous. Because once you start grasping to try to get ahead, there's no end to it. And so people start cutting corners to get every little advantage they can. Amos imagines these traders sitting at home on the Sabbath thinking, "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances." An ephah is just a bushel of wheat. So you make the bushel of wheat a little smaller, you mix in some chaff, and you raise the price. You practice deceit. The ends are what matters, so if the ends justify the means, it's not a huge problem.

Sometimes that cheating happens in small ways. In Packer's article, he recounts a preschool tryout where a hedge fund manager mentions that the safest way to get into a good public school is to game the special-needs system. If there are one million kids in the city's public schools, who's

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> George Packer, "When the Culture War Comes for the Kids," *The Atlantic*, October 2019.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/10/when-the-culture-war-comes-for-the-kids/596668/>

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going to notice if one of them cheated the system? And sometimes that cheating happens in big ways. It was eleven years ago that our economy plunged into recession due, in no small part, to credit default swaps. Bundling subprime mortgages is just a more modern way of mixing the chaff with the grain. Who's going to notice?

It's easy to read Amos and think that all he is doing is chastising people. And, to be fair, that's a lot of it. But Amos is also giving us something positive. He's giving us a vision of a different economy. A new way of ascribing value and a new way of storing worth. A new way of ordering the world and a new way of ordering our lives.

Because of the promises of God, the promises God made with Israel through their covenant, the promises God makes with us through our baptisms, you don't have to try to constantly justify your worth or your value or your dignity. It isn't contingent on anything. You know you already have it and there's nothing that anyone else can ever do to take it away from you.

That's what justification is all about. Instead of spending our lives running around finding evidence that we are acceptable, trying to come up with arguments for our place in the world, we can spend our lives living gratefully. As St. Augustine once famously put it, "our hearts are restless until they rest in [God]."<sup>3</sup> In Jesus Christ, we have been taken into the very heart of God. So come, rest, serve, and, most of all, live.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.