

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 10, 2021

AMOS 5:6-7, 10-15 | PSALM 90:12-17 | HEBREWS 4:12-16 | MARK 10:17-31

Seven or eight years ago, the radio show *This American Life* ran a story about the “good guy discount.”¹ This is exactly what it sounds like. This man, a friend of one of the producers, would go into a store, bring his items up to the register, and say, “Is there any way I can get a discount on this? You know. I’m a good guy. You’re a good guy. Good guy discount.” And not all the time, but enough of the time, the cashier would shrug and say, “Yea, sure.”

“Good guys” just guys, of course, but the shorthand for people who are upstanding members of our community. They put out their trash on time and pay their taxes and all the rest. They don’t hurt anyone. They don’t get violent. They’re good. We like them at barbeques and parties, on committees and on boards. We’ll even give them discounts because, hey, who doesn’t love a good guy? Well, Amos and St. Mark. They don’t dislike good people, but they’re a little skeptical of our judgements about what exactly goodness is.

Today’s reading from Amos is a good place to start. Amos is an agricultural worker from the southern kingdom of Judah who is called by God to go and prophecy to the northern kingdom of Israel. This is how Amos describes life in the northern kingdom. “You trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain.” You “afflict the righteous... take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.” You “turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!”

The way Amos talks about it, the kingdom of Israel must have been just sheer pandemonium. Just chaos in the streets. People must have been completely livid at their inability to live and function without such rampant injustices around them.

But if you talked to people in ancient Israel, if you did one of those proverbial man-on-the-street interviews, people would say that things were getting better all the time. After all, this was a time when the northern kingdom of Israel was famously wealthy. It wasn’t Dow 25,000, but maybe Dow 25. What’s that Amos guy talking about?

And that disconnect, the lack of awareness, is part of the problem. In fact, if you read Amos and the prophets from this time, you notice there are often two parallel critiques going on. One is that people are taking bribes and pushing aside the needy and doing things that are obviously wrong. The second critique is that people really just don’t care. That as long as I’m better off than I was yesterday, I don’t really think about it. And it’s that second group of people, the self-proclaimed good guys, that Amos has the harshest words for.

And that criticism gets picked up in the gospels, too. James Keenan, a Jesuit priest, has this great little phrase in one of his books where he writes that the gospel writers ascribe sin not to people who knowingly commit immoral acts but to individuals who “do not bother to love.”² Sin is not trying to solve a problem and failing. Sin is not making your faithful best guess and being wrong in the long run. Sin is not just messing up. No, sin is not being able to be bothered to love. Amos would agree.

That image of being “bothered” is nice because it suggests an interruption, something that we haven’t planned and created for ourselves. That sin isn’t just about what we consciously choose to do, but it’s about what our self-created agendas hide from us. What keeps us from loving others isn’t hatred as much as the inertia of getting through the day.

The novelist Jonathan Franzen recently put it this way. “You might wake up in the night and realize that you’re lonely in your marriage, or that you need to think about what your level of consumption is doing to the planet, but the next day you have a million little things to do, and the day

¹ “Good Guys,” *This American Life*, January 10, 2014, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/515/good-guys>.

² Daniel Harrington SJ et al., *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 101.

after that you have another million things.”³ Life is just a million little things all the way down. And when you have a million little things to do, you don’t have time to be bothered.

That might help us understand the command that Jesus gives to this wealthy man who wants to inherit eternal life. This guy keeps all the commandments. He’s a respectable person in his community. He’s the Goodest of the Good Guys. And so Jesus says that there’s just one thing left for him to do. “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, [so that] you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

It’s curious that Mark notes that even though this wealthy man apparently has everything, he lacks something. Jesus actually says it’s “one thing.” Something that will make it difficult for him to enter the kingdom of God. Something that his wealth can’t purchase. And the thing he lacks is the ability to be bothered. Because wealth has a way of crowding that out.

The problem isn’t so much money itself but the ways that wealth insulates you from the experiences of others. Wealth makes it easier to not be bothered. Wealth makes it easier not to have to think about climate change. Or racism. Or poverty. Or war. Or anything other than your immediate experience of life. Wealth makes it easier to just focus on your million little things.

Few of us are vulgar enough to look at the world’s problems and declare, “I cannot be bothered with this.” But we do it in more subtle ways. We label things as “political issues” when they happen to other people and “pastoral care” when they happen to us. Or we use a dog whistle. These are “urban” problems. Or we give up any sort of public concern altogether. Why do public ministry when you could just be a spiritual concierge?

These are not healthy disagreements about the most effective way to solve problems or discussions of how we can best serve our neighbors. They are mostly just ways of deflecting. Of abrogating responsibility. Of preventing ourselves from having to be bothered. And that’s a spiritually terminal perspective. Because, as the rich man learned, you can walk around with Jesus if you’re not able to be bothered. You can travel with Jesus if you’re not able to be bothered. But you can’t follow Jesus if you’re not able to be bothered.

The inability to be bothered is ultimately about transformation. The problem with the wealthy man is that his commitment to his wealth has made it impossible for him to change or grow or be transformed. He is absolutely willing to follow Jesus as long as it doesn’t mean changing anything about himself, his life, or his relationship with other people. And why should he? He’s a good guy. But the kingdom of God isn’t about being a good guy. The northern kingdom of Israel was full of good guys. The kingdom of God is about transformation.

And that transformation, that capacity to be bothered into salvation, is what Jesus invites us into. After all, “many who are first shall be last, and many who are last shall be first.” For the “good guys” who are first in the world, it’s going to be difficult. Jesus invites this rich man into eternal life, and he goes away grieving. Because it’s certainly easier not to be bothered.

But for those who, to use Amos’s phrase, seek good, who believe that goodness isn’t simply something latent within their being but brought into the world through the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God is readily apparent. Because in between the million little things that we fill our days with, the invitation is always present. There is always room to be transformed by grace. And there is always an opportunity to be bothered enough to love.

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³ Jonathan Franzen, *The End of the End of the Earth: Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 6.