

## ABOUT LIFE

Amos 8:4-7

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 18, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Old Testament lesson comes from the prophet Amos, chapter 8, verses 4 through 7. In this Old Testament lesson, the LORD vows to punish those who commit injustice, and by doing so, he shows his regard for all human life. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Amos 8, beginning at verse 4, we read in Jesus' name.

- 4 Hear this, you who trample on the needy  
and bring the poor of the land to an end,  
5 saying, "When will the new moon be over,  
that we may sell grain?  
And the Sabbath,  
that we may offer wheat for sale,  
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great  
and deal deceitfully with false balances,  
6 that we may buy the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals  
and sell the chaff of the wheat?"  
7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:  
"Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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What makes human life valuable? That's the big question I would like for us to consider this morning. What makes human life valuable?

Now, I'm already assuming a few things. First of all, I'm assuming that human life is valuable, and that you already agree with me that human life is valuable. And this, I think, is a fairly safe assumption. Almost everyone accepts the proposition that human life is valuable.

I'm also going to assume—and this might be a little bit riskier—I'm assuming that you also believe that every human life is *equally* valuable. And I think most people in our society still agree with that statement, at least in theory. Although, in practice, nobody actually lives this way, and we'll circle back around to this a bit later. But, at least in theory, most people in our society believe that every human life is equally valuable.

Why? This has not always been the prevailing view of the world. So why would most people in our society agree that every human life is equal? The answer is the cultural influence of Christianity. Aside from Judaism, which shares a similar moral foundation, I can't find another religion or philosophy in the world that can produce the conviction that every human life is equally valuable. Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, reject human equality. This is at the core of their religion. We see it in the teachings of karma and reincarnation. Those who are reincarnated into a lower social class, are getting what they deserve, while those who are

born into the upper class are being rewarded. At the very core of their religion is the belief that human beings are not equal.

A naturalist philosophy, such as evolutionary theory, would also lead us to believe that humans are not equal. If we are constantly evolving, then the more evolved persons are more valuable, and the less evolved don't deserve the same dignity. If you want an example, look up the word "eugenics."

Any kind of tribalism prioritizes one's own group over another group. And this is simply human nature. It's a struggle for power. If we can put down others, we can step on their backs to get up. Or if we have the power, we need to keep others down or they'll rise up and take the power from us. It's human nature, and it's in the hearts of all of us. We don't come by equality naturally.

So why do we have, in our society, an assumption that all human life is equal in value? It comes from Christianity. Anywhere in the world, if you find a society that believes all humans are equal in value, you will find a society with a history of Christianity. And this does not mean that Christians have a perfect track record. We are also sinners. And we often say one thing, but live a different way. But the concept of human equality comes from Christian doctrine, and it has been embedded in our society. So even among Americans who are not Christians, there's an assumption of human equality, even if they can't say why.

Christianity has a unique way of answering the question, "What makes human life valuable?" Here's the Christian answer: Mankind, both male and female, were created in the image of God. In Genesis 1(:27) we read, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This is where the value of human life comes from. You are valuable, not because of what you do, but because of who made you. And the person who made you is the same person who made the person next to you. And he's the same person who made the richest person in the world and the poorest person in the world. Every human being is valuable, and equally valuable, because we were all created in the image of God. That's the basis for equality.

Now, you might already know this. So it might not seem like such a novel idea, until we realize that none of us actually live this way. You might accept this to be true, but you don't live by it. And I can preach this to you, but I don't live by it either. None of us do. We all live by a different standard of human value. And it's this: function. This is absolutely critical for us to understand about ourselves. We live as if a person's value depends on their function to us. God values human life on the basis of creation. And that's how he teaches us to value human life. But we value human life on the basis of function. And I hope you notice the difference. If the value of human life is based on creation, then all humans are equally valuable. No exceptions. But if the value of human life is based on function, then all human beings are not equally valuable. The strong become more valuable. The rich become more valuable. The attractive become more valuable. The intelligent become more valuable. The humorous become more valuable. Anyone who provides some sort of positive value to us becomes more valuable.

Now here's the really insidious part of it: if we treat people differently on the basis of their function, who's really the most valuable person in this system? Me. Every person around me has a different value, based on their function. That is, their worth depends on how they can benefit me. And that makes me the god of this system. This is straight from the devil, and it echoes the fall into sin, where the devil tempted Adam and Eve to become like God. That's the nature of sin, to treat ourselves as if we are gods. So the value of other humans ends up being the function they serve for us. And we all live this way.

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We might say that every human being is equally valuable, but then we're standing in the self-checkout line behind someone who doesn't get it. And suddenly, that person's value drops. Or you're at the school cafeteria, and you see a kid with no friends sitting all by herself, but the popular kids say they have a seat for you at their table. They can elevate your status, so they become more valuable. We distinguish between people all the time. And we do it based on the function they provide for us. It's completely contrary to the way God values human life.

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We see a bad case of this in the Old Testament lesson from Amos (8:4-7).

Amos was a prophet of the LORD during the time of the divided kingdom. This was when Israel was split between north and south. Amos was from the south, but he prophesied in the north around 760 BC. This was about forty years before the northern kingdom was annihilated by Assyria. Amos condemned the northern kingdom for many sins, especially idolatry, that is, the worship of false gods, and injustice toward the needy and the poor. In this passage, Amos focuses on the sin of injustice toward the needy and the poor.

He accused them of trampling on the needy and bringing the poor of the land to an end (8:4). Verses five and six describe their sin. They said,

“When will the new moon be over,  
that we may sell grain?  
And the Sabbath,  
that we may offer wheat for sale,  
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great  
and deal deceitfully with false balances,  
that we may buy the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals  
and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

“The new moon” and “the Sabbath” refer to the religious observances of Israel. They were holy days. And, as holy days, the people of Israel were commanded not to work. That meant shops had to be closed. You couldn't buy or sell anything. So they saw these days of worship as financial inconveniences. They couldn't turn a profit on those days, so they just wanted them to be over.

And it's not just that they had a craving for business, but they were cheating. That's what it meant to make the ephah small and the shekel great. Back in those days, they didn't have values printed on their currency like we do. Today, a twenty dollar bill is worth twenty dollars. The cashier can't say it's only worth nineteen. But in those days, they measured money by weighing it on a scale. A shekel was a unit of weight used to measure currency. And they measured grain by pouring it into a basket. That's what an Ephah was. And they didn't have regulators from the government coming around to check these things. These days, we do. When you go to the gas station, you'll see a sticker on the pump saying when that pump was checked. That's to make sure that when the gas station says they pumped a gallon, they actually pumped a full gallon. In ancient times, some merchants would cheat their customers by having two different scales and two different baskets. When they were buying grain from the farmers, they could use a light scale and a big basket. That way, they got more grain from the farmers and paid less for it. Then when they turned around to sell the grain, they could swap in a heavy scale and a small basket. That way, they sold less grain to their customers and got more money for it. So they were using different weights and different scales to cheat the farmers on one end and their customers on the other end. That's what it means to “make the ephah small and the shekel great.”

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It was a case of those in power using it to oppress the poor. So to these rich people, it's not like the needy and the poor had no value. They did have a value to them, but the value was in the function they served. They served the function of being exploited.

And exploiting the poor had a double value. Once you squeezed the last few pennies out of the poor, they would be so destitute that their last resort was to sell themselves into slavery. That's the way slavery usually worked in the ancient world. It wasn't really a racial thing. It was an economic thing. If you had debts you could not pay, the last resort was to sell yourself into slavery to pay off your debts. Your master would then take care of you, but he also owned you. So it could be helpful if you had a decent master, but the rich could exploit it by pushing the poor into debt so that they could buy them as slaves. And that's what the rich people in Israel were doing. That's what it means to "buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals."

So their sin was twofold: they despised the worship of God, and they exploited the needy.

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The world has not changed so much. We still do the same things. Even Christians do the same things. We can confess that every human life is equal, but then treat them differently based on their function. Like Amos' day, there are still ways this is done financially. Predatory loans exploit the needy. And by "predatory loan," I mean the kind where the lender sees that the borrower might have trouble paying it, but they issue it anyway so they can charge a high interest rate. And if the borrower defaults, then the lender can confiscate the collateral on top of it. That's immoral. So are high interest credit cards, most payday loans, and used car dealers who advertise, "No money? Bad credit? No problem." They're targeting needy people so they can saddle them with a high interest rate. It's exploitation. They see a value in needy people, but the value is all in the function they serve. They can be exploited.

The worst case is when we see no value in a person, so we extinguish them. I'm talking about abortion.

Now, right off the bat, I need to emphasize that we're talking about this, just like we talk about everything, under the cross. That is, we talk about this in the context of the forgiveness of sins. The primary reason we talk about sin is so that it can be forgiven. Every sin falls under the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. There is nothing outside the realm of forgiveness. So we talk about sin in order to forgive it. If you have ever obtained an abortion, if you have ever participated in an abortion, or if you have ever pressured a woman to obtain an abortion, you are forgiven. God invites you to confess your sin. He promises to forgive you. And he does forgive you, because Jesus paid for that sin. No exceptions. Nothing is too great. Christianity is all about forgiveness.

The world talks about acceptance. That's not the same thing as forgiveness. The world wants to deal with sin by making everything okay. But that's not possible. In order to make one thing okay, they have to make something else not okay. So it's just a shuffling of what is or isn't okay, and we never deal with sin. But Christianity is different. God condemned all sin in the flesh of Jesus. That is why I can declare to you that you are forgiven. That's the first reason we talk about sin. But we also talk about sin so that we can know what the will of God is and stop doing those things that are contrary to his will, because God's will is good.

And I hope we can think about this as a moral issue before we consider it as a political issue. I also hope we can separate it from other political issues. You don't have to believe that one party is right about everything while the other party is wrong about everything. It's actually kind of foolish to think that. So I'm asking you to have an open mind. And I promise to do the same with you. If you think I'm wrong, tell me so. I will listen. I won't insult you, and I won't call you evil, because I truly want to figure out the other side of this.

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Here's the reason we should protect unborn children: It's wrong to kill an innocent human being. That's it. It's really that simple. It's wrong to kill an innocent human being.

So this is a human rights issue, because unborn children are human beings. And that is not a religious statement. It's a scientific statement. Human life begins at conception. That's a scientific truth. It can be observed. At the moment of conception, there is a new living organism. It is alive, the DNA is different than the mother's, and it is human. Human life begins at conception.

The moral component is a little more religious. It's wrong to kill an innocent human being. You can call that a religious statement, but it's also the most obvious part of natural law. This is written on everyone's heart, regardless of one's religious belief. So we can make the case for protecting unborn children without appealing to religion. And this is what pro-life people generally do. We focus on these two points: human life begins at conception, and it's wrong to kill an innocent human being.

So for a long time I thought that the Bible and Christian doctrine didn't have anything unique to offer in this debate. But there's this: human equality. As we move into a post-Christian society, we still have the assumption that all human beings are equal, but a post-Christian culture doesn't know why. And this means that, in practice, more and more, we are defaulting to human nature. And sinful human nature values people differently based on their function. So a child that is wanted has value, and it is a crime to kill her. But if a child is unwanted, she has no value, and she can be killed, even though there is no intrinsic difference between the two children.

So the crux of the matter is this: What makes human life valuable? Function or creation? If it's function, then it's okay to kill human beings who have less function. But if it's creation, then every human being has equal rights, regardless of size, age, intellect, ability, or anything else.

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God's answer is this, and it's not just about the value of other human beings, it's also about the value of you: You are valuable, and every human life is valuable, because you are created in the image of God. He made you. You belong to him. He values you, and he values you the same as the person next to you, the person above you, and the person beneath you. He even values you the same as his own Son, because he gave his Son in order to purchase you back. Regardless of who you are, regardless of what you have done, you are valuable to you your Creator. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.