

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
July 25 & 26, 2015
Matt Moberg
Amos
Amos 5:18-24**

Good morning, everybody. How're you doing? Are you feeling good? Good! My name is Matt Moberg. I am the director of The Table which is CPC's Sunday night worship expression. It's a really fun community. If you ever want to come and participate in it with us, we'd love to have you! It's 5:00 pm Sunday. If you want to write that down, go ahead. I'll give you a moment. Let me pray real quick as we go into the message for this morning.

Jesus, You are good and You are here. We believe that and we trust that and so we ask that You speak, Lord. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and glorifying to You, Lord. In Christ's Name. All God's children said,

[All:] Amen.

Let's start with a story. It's a story I heard a while ago. I told this story at The Table a few weeks ago, but since none of you came, it's like I have a license to do so again. It's a story about a pastor. She's at home one night. It's a Saturday evening and she's just having cozy alone-time, trying to refresh. She's got a book open by the fire. She's got a nice glass of wine poured. She's just having some me time, if you will. Well, in the middle of said me time, she hears somebody banging on her door and so she gets up. She goes to the door and at the door is a beggar man who is panting. He is breathing heavily. His hands are on his knees and he's just a hot mess. Finally he looks up at her and she can see that there are tears coming down from his eyes and she's like, "What is going on right now?" She says, "Can I help you, sir? Is there something I can do for you?" The man, trying to catch his breath, trying to gain composure, says, "I need your help, pastor. There's a family I know. *They* need your help, really. You see, they are about to be kicked out of their house. If they don't come up with the cash for rent by 8:30 tomorrow morning, the landlord is going to kick them out. The dad has been trying to find work for months now but he's not having any luck. The mom is at home usually, taking care of the kids, so she's got her hands tied and on top of that, the mother-in-law is living there, too. So it's a full house and it's the middle of winter. Pastor, if we don't come up with the cash, they are about to be kicked out onto the streets."

Tears falling, the pastor looks at him and says, "Of course, we will do something. We have to do something. Let me place a few phone calls. Let me look at some budget numbers. We'll take care of this. Don't worry about it." You could see the weight just falling off this man in that moment and he says, "Thank you! You don't know what this means." The pastor looks at him

and asks, “How do you know this family? What’s your connection to them?” He says, “Me? Well, I’m their landlord.”

There is often a gap between what we profess and what we practice. As human beings, we speak two very different languages to the world. We speak that which we believe and we speak the ways that we believe, the how we believe. When the two are not congruent with one another, when they don’t speak of the same story, it’s a problem. It’s a problem when the landlord says, “Help! I’m about to kick these people out and there’s nothing I can do about it. Could you help?” It’s kind of like the old story of the king who comes home one night and there’s a beggar at his gates and he says to his men, “Get this man out of here. I am way too compassionate to look upon such heart-breaking things.” There’s a disconnect there.

Let me drive the point home even further. It’s kind of like a few years back when the city of Minneapolis came out loud and proud saying, “We are going to shut down sex trafficking in this city.” And yet this April, they opened a mega strip club three stories high on Hennepin Avenue, absolutely contradicting the idea that they are trying to shut down sex trafficking.

One more example. I’ll make it more personal. The other day I was at Turtle Bread in Linden Hills. It’s my favorite breakfast spot. If anybody would ever want to take me there, you could. I’ll give you my information after. But I was there with my son and I looked across the room and there was a man with his three kids and he was on his phone the whole time. I was like, “You’re a piece of work, man.” I was so fired up, I got on my phone and started tweeting about it. I was like, “Parents, we need to be present to our kids” while all the while my kid is throwing potatoes at my face and saying, “Dad, please look at me.” There is often a gap between what we profess and what we practice.

The New Testament tells us over and over again that we are the Body of Christ. That means what people see, not just what we profess, the whole piece of it together is the story of Jesus that they are receiving. Bob Goff said the other day that it is one thing to tell groups of people that they are welcome at your church. It is another thing to actually welcome them when they come. In our faith language as a body here at Christ Presbyterian Church, are we professing and practicing the story of Jesus that we want to put out there? Everything falls apart when our profession goes one way and our practice goes another.

The prophet we are looking at today is Amos. Amos came about in the eighth century. He rose in prophetic power during Israel’s silver age, which means that they are kind of at the peak of all their power. They are at the pinnacle of their territorial expansion. They are accumulating more and more. They are wealthy. Things are going well at this time and church, religion, is buzzing. I mean, people are coming from near and far to be part of these worship services. It was kind of like the days of Billy Graham or Oral Roberts where you had these tent revivals in Bethel and people came and just filled the place up. They would do sacrifices and songs and turn to their neighbors and say *hello*, all the kinds of things we religious folks like.

Amos went there and saw what they professed, but then he saw what they practiced. While they professed that God’s favor was upon them—that was why they were growing rich, that was why they were happy—the reality of their practice was that they were exploiting the poor. They were neglecting the needy. They were taking from those who had nothing. So God grabs this farmer named Amos and says, “I need you to go over there and shut that down because those people

want to go to a worship service, but they don't want to go to church." Church starts *after* the service. Church is a lifestyle. Worship service has a beginning and an end and it focuses on what we profess. It focuses on what we believe, but not really *how* we believe. So Amos takes the Word of God and brings this message to the people. Chapter 5, this is God speaking:

- ²¹ "I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
²³ Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Can you hear Dr. King's voice right there? I have a good amount of friends who are atheists or agnostics. Some of them don't really know what they are but they often use verses like this and say, "See, Matt, you have lost your mind. Even God doesn't like you working at church. Church is a dirty business. He doesn't like your music. He doesn't like your religious festivals." "Thanks for the pick-me-up, guys. Appreciate the support on that one." What God is saying here though is not an indictment on the church. He is longing for the church. He is not calling the people to leave the church. He is calling the people to *be* the church. It's the same thing you see when Jesus goes into the temple and flips over the tables. It's not because He hates the church, it's because He is looking for the church. Where is it? This is not what it's supposed to be about. "You've turned this into something else. You've forgotten the weightier matters of the Law. You've focused on things like grain offerings and making sure that you hit all of the notes when you're singing the songs, but you've forgotten about things like justice, mercy, and compassion. You've focused on what you profess, but you've forgotten that you are called to practice these things because faith is not just about what we profess. It's about how we practice.

This is the problem. When church becomes a worship service and not a lifestyle, when it becomes a worship service, then it requires a worship place. And to have a place where people gather, there is a time attached to it. That means that there is a *here* and if you have a here, then there is also a *there*. This is the language of separation. All of a sudden you have people who are in and people who are out. You have us versus them, me versus you. Ever since the prophets first began to speak as Christ perfectly revealed God on the cross, the people who claimed to gather and follow Jesus have been very involved in the world. We don't buy into the language of separation. We don't believe it. But the moment we start saying that our faith is all about the here, all of those who are out there have to pay the price for that and there are a lot of those out there.

Amos is telling them to get over it, like, "Look over here and look out there, do you see the poor whose backs you are breaking? Those are your brothers. Do you see the minorities whose stereotypes you are perpetuating? Those are your sisters. Do you see the single dad who cannot get hired? The single mom who has grown so tired? Those are your parents." In the family of God, there is no here, there is no there, there is no separation. In fact, we are called to be those who are agents of reconciliation, people who are closing the gaps to the separation,

shutting it down and saying, "I am for you. I am with you. I will walk with you beyond just my words to show you that this is so." 1st John 4:20 says,

²⁰Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

That's a really tough, tough verse for me because I don't like people very much, but I love God. The problem with people is people are angry. People are loud. People are dramatic. People can be Packer fans. I mean, people can be a lot of terrible things, but God is often quiet. He is more hidden. He is a lot more accommodating to my life. People are always right there in my space, and yet what the text says and what the Word behind the text has always been saying through the prophets, is that you cannot say you love God and be taken seriously if you do not love humanity, if you do not love your brothers and sisters. If my personal relationship with Jesus Christ does not lead into a public relationship with the world, then I am a liar. I'm all talk, but please don't take me too seriously.

So we ask then, how do we actually live our lives if God is only desiring that His people are gathering for the sake of formation so that we would come together Sunday mornings or Saturday nights or when you all start coming Sunday nights to The Table? But we are being called to come together so that we can go out. Formation is not the end-all, be-all. This is the half-time of the football game where we review the plays that we are called to make. We get the pep talks from John Crosby. We get these moments where we are reminded that it is not just about being fed. We are called to feed others. We are called to be agents of reconciliation who shut down the gaps that stand between us and them, you and me, here and there.

So how do we do that? As Paul says, in everything we do, the way we think, the way we live, in the stories we embody, they are all to be replicas of how Jesus lived. This is a lofty goal and unattainable by us. We are not going to be Jesus. Let's let that dream die, but Jesus sets forth a pattern that is very much a reality for us today. What we see in Jesus is unlike what we see in the Old Testament, where God is basically unapproachable, tucked away in the Holy of Holies, visited only by the select few on very select days or completely removed like in Ezekiel 10, when sin just became too much. God could not stomach it any more and He left. But in the New Testament, as followers of Christ, we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the Incarnation. Some of my favorite words in all of Scripture are John 1:14.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

If our question is, how to live the lives of justice that God desires, then the Incarnation is the answer because the Word that becomes flesh is the marriage of what we profess. It is taking what we believe and putting skin on it. The profession and the practice become one and it moves into the neighborhood. Eugene Peterson says that in the Old Testament, you see a lot of prophets and tablets of the Law and they are kind of like military supply planes flying over refugee camps, dropping down aid and saying, "Here you go. Hope this helps." The Incarnation is the story of God becoming the Divine stranger and creeping quietly into humanity.

For the first thirty years, Jesus says nothing of significant note. He hardly makes Himself noticed, but He watches what it is like to actually be human. He empathizes with the human

condition, not from a place disconnected, not from far away, but as one who walks with us, who knows what it's like. There is power in with-ness. I don't know if you guys have experienced when you may have been in a dark place or even at a high point and somebody says, "I am with you." They don't come up to you and say, "Here's what you need to do" but they say, "I will walk with you." I think an amazing story about that is the story of Ruth and Naomi. Go home and read that one. We'll stop here for the sake of time. If you want to know about with-ness, that's one you need to take in.

I was going to stop there, but I'm not going to. Real quick, hold on. The story of Ruth is the story of when she and Naomi were about to go separate ways and Ruth says, "I will never leave you. Where you go, I will go. Where you serve, I will serve. I am for you. I am not going to fix you. I am going to be with you." If you want to be a witness for Christ, then with-ness is the way because the story of Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, is one of the core principles that takes superiority over all other principles. There is no longer a here. There is no longer a there. We are called to move into the neighborhood, to be with people, not just talk *about* people, but talk *with* and *to* people because true love is always involved. True love cannot happen from a distance. It can't happen if there are gaps at play. True love always gets close. That is what Jesus does and so to love the other, we have to live the experiences of the other, the realities, the patterns, the perceptions.

One of the core truths about the Gospel in our formation is that we are being formed, when we gather before the Word of God, into people who are more empathetic. Before we throw stones at people, we learn to love them like Jesus loved us. And how did Jesus love us? He entered into our reality. He tried to understand what was happening, He tries to understand what the stories are that are going on right now. Justice is not born out of isolation. Justice is born out of Incarnation. When you all think about the things that you believe, the words that you might profess, what words in your life personally need to become flesh? What professions are being divorced from practices that need to be resurrected? Where is there death in need of life? How do we replicate the Incarnation?

One of the hardest parts about that John 1:14 text, when it says that we cannot love God if we hate our brothers and sisters, beyond having a struggle with humanity in general, is, it is hard being *for* people who are very close to us. It is much easier to reach out to people who are out of reach. A great example of this is, I have a Compassion child. My wife and I do, but I'll take the credit for him. His name is Edgar. Edgar lives in Nicaragua. Edgar is an average student. He's got a dad who is alive, but he's not really around. Edgar is a great soccer player or so he tells me in his letters. He's got a lot going on. I could tell you much, much more about Edgar, but if you were to ask me the name of the five-year-old across the street from where I live, I have no idea. That is the gap between what I profess and what I practice. I think when we are talking about things like justice, mercy, and compassion, there is a trap of idealism that can happen with those abstract terms. I think Jesus does a brilliant thing when He completely beats that trap and says, "Love your neighbor." Yes, that person right there. Do you know your neighbor's name? Do you know what makes them excited? Not fix them, but know them. To live the Incarnation is to be where we are, embedded where we are, equipped with the awareness that Christ is moving in all places. Are we participating in that though? There is no here, and there is no there, in the story of Jesus Christ.

I was talking to my dad about this the other day. I was thinking back on high school. I'm not a

moron anymore, but I used to be a real moron in a very bad way. One of the things I told my dad was, "You know what, Pops? I wasn't great in general, but you were always *for* me. You were always *with* me and you always walked with me no matter what. And I stayed close to the story you've got, close to our family, because I knew you were with me. I knew you were for me."

I wasn't going to close this way but I'm going to. Right now, I'm physically here but emotionally and psychologically, I'm not fully here. My wife is in the hospital right now. I'm going back down there after the next two services this morning. We've got some pregnancy complications. It's been that the whole time. As I think about the power of being with people, this is our second lengthy stint in the hospital. She'll probably be there for the next few months. When we've spoken that out loud in this community, we have had people live the Incarnation right before our eyes. The first time I talked about this was the first trip to the hospital a few months back. It was at The Table. Immediately following the service Kate Kirk, an amazing woman, grabbed a loaf of bread and some juice, we do the Eucharist every week at The Table, and she goes, "Can I bring Communion down to your wife at the hospital?" She had never seen Lauren. She didn't know Lauren, but we had a holy moment there in that hospital room that night.

Last week when we realized we were going back to the hospital, we found out from the doctor we had to leave within a half-hour, Mattie Wood and Kathy Wood were at our house for the next three hours in the middle of the night because Wyatt was sleeping. You know what that does for me, for my wife, for my family? Nobody is trying to fix us. Nobody is coming in with platitudes saying, "This will get you further. This is how we got through this." They are coming in and saying, "This is hard but we are with you. God is still good. We are going to walk with you until the story fully wraps up."

If we want justice, if we want redemption, if we want healing in the world, we have to be *in* the world. In the final prayer of Jesus with His disciples, He tells God very specifically, it's a beautiful moment, He says, "God, be with these guys who I have groomed, who I have formed, who I have called to carry My story into the world. Be with them. Let me be clear, God, I am not asking You to take them out of the world. That's not what I want. I want them here. They are in the business of telling My story by living My story, by taking what we profess and what we practice and making them one."

Church, I hope you know that when this church started many years ago, when the shovels were first put in the ground, I hope you know that John Crosby has been leading us now for 25 years, John did not take up this position because he woke up one day and said, "I have a really masculine voice and I have great thoughts. What job can I do to get people to listen to me?" John did not take up the job for that reason. John did not take up this pastoral position because he thought, "Man, if people could know a little bit more about religion, we might be able to fix this thing." John believes in the power of what it looks like when people love like Christ loved. The whole reason we are a community gathering on Saturday nights, Sunday mornings, and Sunday nights is so we can be formed into a people who love in here *and* out there, just as Jesus loved us. That is the whole reason we exist, not just to be fed but to feed those around us. Pray with me.

Jesus, You are good. We love You. Help us to love our brothers and sisters, Lord, till we actually, really love You, till we embody what we profess in the ways that we practice. God, be in this space. Bring to mind, Lord, the words that You want us to bring into the

flesh. The professions that we make, Lord, help us put into practice. Help us to know our neighbors. Help us to learn the power of what it means to be with people the way that You came and were with us and are with us still. In Christ's Name. All of God's children, we all say,

[All:] Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.