

Fr. Curtis Miller July 10-11, 2021 Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I was ordained a transitional deacon six years ago this weekend, in preparation for my ordination as a priest a year later. So the readings this weekend are special to me because they are the first ones I ever preached on. They are also special because they have a lot to say about how to follow God's call in our lives, even if we are ordinary people, like the prophet Amos, the apostles, or me. Even six years later I still humbled and surprised that I was ordained; there were people who seemed holier, smarter, and more charismatic who left seminary along the way, and yet here am I as a priest, unworthy and imperfect as I am.

A little background on our first reading will help. Amos was just an ordinary man, a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores, when God called him to go preach His Word to the people of Israel. At first, Amos condemns the wicked deeds of Israel's neighbors, and the crowd is on his side, but then Amos turns his attention to the Israelites themselves. He has saved his fiercest condemnations for the Israelites because they are God's people, and they should have done better. The crowd turns against this impudent prophet, and it's at this point that the priest, Amaziah, steps forward and tells Amos to get out of their town. He accuses Amos of being one of the class of professional, self-proclaimed prophets, who went around pretending to speak messages from God, and seeking payment for their services.

Amos says that he was not one of these professional prophets, but that he was just a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores, until God Himself called Amos to become a prophet. Yet even these humble, ordinary occupations reveal something about what sort of prophet Amos is. We all know what a shepherd is: one who lives with the flock, tending the sheep, and protecting them from danger, even to the point of self-sacrifice. That makes sense as a symbol of what kind of prophet Amos is.

But what is a dresser of sycamores? Is it someone who puts clothes on sycamores? What would a sycamore wear? Obviously, a *tree* shirt. I'm just kidding... and checking to make sure you're paying attention. No, a dresser of sycamores was someone who tended that particular Middle Eastern tree, more like a fig tree than our American sycamores. Now the fruit naturally produced by that tree was hard, bitter, and small. What the sycamore dresser would do would be to make an incision through the tough skin of these fruits, cut through to the heart of it, and that would help it grow and ripen into a sweet, edible fruit.

What does that have to do with Amos' preaching? Well, isn't that exactly what he did with his words to the hearts of the Israelites who heard him? He cut through their hardened hearts with God's Word, which the Scriptures tell us is "sharper than any two-edged sword." He pierced their hearts with the hard truth that they had been unfaithful to their covenant with God, turning to worship idols, and committing acts of violence and

injustice against their neighbors whom God called them to love. Amos is not speaking his own words, but the Word of God.

That is the kind of prophet that God calls every Christian to be. After all, every Christian is baptized into Christ as “priest, prophet, and king.” Being a prophet isn’t about predicting the future or standing on a street corner with a sign that says: “The End is Near!” No, we are called to speak God’s Word, calling people back to faithfulness to God. Sometimes we’ll be like the shepherd, offering comforting words of solace, but other times we will have to be like Amos, dresser of sycamores, speaking words that cut through the hardness of people’s hearts. This isn’t easy. And if we are to preach this message to other people, then we must first be living it ourselves. We need to repent ourselves from our sins, and strive to draw ever closer to God, before we can ever tell other people to do the same.

We can’t just “talk the talk;” we have to “walk the walk.” And that’s where today’s Gospel reading comes in. Jesus is giving instructions to His disciples before sending them out to preach His Good News. Like Amos, these disciples were simple, ordinary people, fishermen, a tax collector, and other common jobs. Yet Jesus called them to follow Him, to become His disciples (which means ‘students’). In this Gospel, Jesus makes them apostles (meaning ‘ones sent out’). No longer are they just following Jesus; they are to go tell others and bring them back to also become followers of Jesus.

And if they are to do that well, they cannot be weighed down by extra baggage. Jesus instructs them not to bring food or money or extra clothes. They are to travel light. And part of their message is their complete reliance upon God to provide for their needs, to be humbly dependent upon the charity of others. We are to do something similar. We might be tempted to say, “Jesus, I don’t really need a walking stick, so could I trade that in and bring along food instead.” But we’re missing the point. It’s not about literally taking or not taking along certain supplies, but about living simply, traveling light, and relying upon God. That way, when we tell other people to put their trust in God, they won’t be able to say, “But you seem to put all your trust in your wealth and possessions.”

This isn’t optional. Preaching Jesus’ Gospel, being prophetic witnesses to God’s Word is essential to being a Christian. We might look back at our past lives and say, “I’m too ordinary or sinful to be God’s prophet,” but the baggage of those thoughts is the most important thing we should leave behind. Yes, we are ordinary and imperfect, but our message is that God can work even through weak instruments like us. And as we cooperate with God’s grace, He will help us to grow and become holier. That is the Word God has spoken to us. Now let us share it with others.