

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
10-11-09
Gates
Amos 5: 6, 10-12, 15, Mark 10:17-31

Amos was a prophet, a long, long time ago. Called out of his fields by God to go and inspire the people, he speaks of an important gathering place, the gates of the city. There in the busy, bustling entry way, the Elders would sit and hear the petitions- for justice, for resolution of conflicts and reconciliation, for help and assistance. Since court was held outside, the people could be freed up of their concerns before they entered God's Holy city. Because of their importance, the gates were also where prophets could come to inspire the people to free themselves to be the people of God. God sent the prophets through history to help the people, to inspire them to shrug off the things that weighted them down, and to help others to be freed too.

Sometimes people listen, but sometimes they don't recognize the messenger God sends. You may have heard or read the story circulating on the internet about the man who was caught up in a flood? The waters come and flood his house and a man comes in a boat to rescue him. Come with me, the water is rising fast, your house will be covered. He said, no thanks, I have faith that God will save me. When he was sitting on the roof of his house, a helicopter came to lift him to safety. He said, no thanks, God will save me. Finally, the man drowns and goes to

heaven. He meets God and says- God, why didn't you save me? God says, what, the boat and the helicopter weren't enough?!

Like Amos, Jesus came as a prophet too. He healed and taught to inspire people. His teachings inspired the rich young man to run him to ask how he could inherit the kingdom of heaven. He told Jesus that he had taken all the steps he knew, and asked what is my next step? Jesus invites him to follow him.

Renowned author Karen Armstrong says, "going to school" in Jesus' time, becoming a disciple meant you completely adopted the lifestyle of the teacher. Jesus invites the young man to become a disciple: sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, free yourself of your attachments and take the next step toward God. Lest we think Jesus taught this only about money- Jesus also invited and was refused by the young man who wanted to wait to follow Jesus until after his father had died and been buried. Jesus came to inspire people to take the next step to seek the kingdom of God now.

God has given us modern day prophets who to call us to experience freedom from the things that hold us back and take the next step. People like Ghandi, MLK Jr. and Mother Teresa inspire with their words but also with their actions. In her book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong she says that we cannot prove the existence of God through science, but we can see the presence and love of God

through the exemplary behavior of human beings and they inspire us to take the next step toward God.

And there are lesser known prophets who inspire us everyday. I once heard Jack Canfield, originator of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series speak. These books are full of inspirational stories of everyday people. He told a story of one of the first times God used him to inspire. He was trying to sell magazines to pay for college. A lady told him she had felt called to go to college to become a college professor but had started raising a family right out of high school. Now though her family was raised, she was too old. He asked her how many years it would take her to become a professor? She guessed ten. He asked her how old will you be if you do it? She said, she would be in her seventies. Then he asked her how old will you be if you don't do it? Ten years later she was a professor at the community college. With a few words, she was inspired to take the next step in her life.

My friend Bertha is an inspiration to me. She has a life threatening illness. She lost health, job, friends, husband, and finances at twenty-five. The disease attacked all her organs and muscles; bed ridden the doctors said she would not live six months. But every day she crawled out of bed. The first day, she just got in and out of bed. Later she would crawl out of bed and into a chair. Then up and down one step of the staircase, until, years later she went back to work full time. I met her twenty years after she first got sick. Five years later the disease attacked

her kidneys. She was on dialysis only six months and came back to work with functioning kidneys. Her kidneys failed completely two years later. After six months she received a transplant and was back to work. She says God must still have something for her to do. She keeps herself free of complaining or worrying so she can take the next step. The courage and faith that she has exhibited in her life has inspired me.

Here's a paraphrase of a quote I have heard attributed to Chuck Yeager the fighter pilot astronaut. Courage is not the absence of fear, but choosing the freedom to take action in spite of it. Who are the people in your life that stand at the gate calling? Who is it that inspires you to take the next step in your life?

Jesus encouraged us and inspires us to live our lives in a manner that recognizes the kingdom of God, heaven, the Holy city is right here in our midst. There are many gates to this holy ground open to us and many people, prophets calling to us to inspire us to take the next step. For each of us the gate, the call, the inspiration may be different, but the goal is the same goal- to enter/create the kingdom in our lives. God calls to each of us with the inspiration we need to hear. And we are also called to stand at the gate and call and inspire others through our words and our actions- exemplary human behavior and love.

I would like to share one last inspirational story. At one of the churches I served we had a vocational celebration in worship. People were asked to share

how they chose their vocation, or how it chose them. Specifically they were asked to tell us how they live out their Christian values in their place of work and to share if their values have been challenged or if their values have supported their work.

Robert now owns a bicycle shop that once belonged to his father. He started working there when he was very young and offered to share because he said that he once thought that working in a bicycle shop was any big deal. After all, how could selling bicycles be a call to serve God? Years ago, a woman came in to the shop with her little boy. She told him he was her last hope. She had gone to many other shops but no one had been able to help them. She explained that her little boy had been born with deformed legs. The doctors gave them the choice of him being in a wheelchair his whole life or amputating his legs and using prosthetics. With the little boy's input, they had chosen amputation. Now all the boys his age were learning to ride bicycles and that is what Martin wanted. But none of the bicycles would accommodate his prosthetics.

Robert had his doubts. He told her that he just sold bicycles for his father, he didn't make them. He didn't know how bicycles were built much less how to retrofit a bicycle for prosthetics. He didn't think that he could help her. But then he met the little boy. Martin was so eager, so excited, so fearless, so confident that he could ride a bicycle. And so trusting that someone would know how to help him. Robert said he couldn't refuse and said he would give it a try.

So they did. They took a bicycle and worked together. They tweaked and adjusted and tried it. Then they tweaked and adjusted and tried again. Over the course of a couple weeks they learned about bicycles and prosthetics and finally got a bicycle fitted for Martin to ride. Robert said the Martin's joy was such a great reward.

And here's the thing, there are prophets and inspiration all over this story.

The woman was called by God out of her fear for Martin's safety and his emotional well-being to ensure he had the chance live the life of a little boy. The love of all mothers in all of time inspired her. Robert doubted his ability but was inspired by the Martin's enthusiasm. Martin was inspired by the man's encouragement, diligence, patience and determination to take the next step and the next step and the next step. You see, today Martin is a man who competes in triathalons all around the world. He swims, runs and races bicycles and gives speeches that inspire other athletes and non-athletes to take the next step in their lives.

The people in the stories I have told you had prophets who called them, but they also became prophets- standing at different gates calling, offering freedom, and inspiring each other. They were each inspired by and to exemplary human behavior that is not only love, not only evidence of God, but is the presence of God.

Listen, do you hear what I hear? It is the prophets calling us from the gates.

Amen.