

## Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Amos 7:12-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; and Mark 6:7-13

In the book *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson connects racism to the same structuring as Indian society. She says racism is built on the framework of caste. "If we have been trained to see humans in the language of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children."<sup>1</sup> American culture has so thoroughly steeped itself in racism that Americans live it unconsciously, just as they know which verb ending to use. The book is hard to read, in part because it reveals my own complicity, me, liberal, Catholic, righteous me! Awareness is an important first step, but where it will lead and how much I am willing to change are yet to be determined. In all honesty, I am comfortable and do not want to change.

I feel the same way about the first reading and gospel this week. They challenge us all to make radical changes and to preach those changes to others. For a second week in a row, we are called to become prophets and missionaries and I do not want to do either. Mark's gospel shows the apostles successfully driving out many demons and curing many sick people, but the stories that frame this story are Jesus' rejection in his hometown and the beheading of John the Baptist for calling out the king's marriage to his brother's wife. In the first reading, Amos left a profitable job in his native land, proclaimed an unpopular message and was ejected from the country for it. Who wants such a life?

Every age has people who like to proclaim and people who like to listen. Today there are endless blogs, social media feeds, self-help books and webcasts. In Amos' time, prophets were so much a part of life that there were companies of them. A desire for importance, power or wealth often inspires the prophets' message. (I know this struggle in myself.) Meanwhile, listeners follow the latest trends in style, status, money-making, spirituality, etc. The audience hungers to move beyond where they are now: lonely, lacking control and suffering. The easiest paths seem the best to choose.

Yet they lead us further into the things we wanted to escape and drag others into our mess. A caste system seems like a good idea for those in the dominant caste; comfort, power and safety abound. At the same time, we all pay a heavy price: the subordinate caste is brutalized and the dominators become cruel. Everyone is distorted. Wilkerson points out we are like actors in a play; "we are not supposed to be ourselves."<sup>2</sup> Loneliness, lack of control and suffering persist. This is not a real solution, is it?

In Israel in the eighth century BCE, the country was prospering. Israel had expanded its borders by conquering two of its neighbors, so militarily and politically it was strong. The economy was booming as well. Yet, this prosperity was not what God calls prosperity because it created a wealth gap, so only some members of society flourished. (Sound familiar?) Amos eloquently proclaimed that God wants a nation that cares for the needy. Jesus calls his followers to the same message. Yuck! Conversion and being a missionary or prophet are a lot of work and guarantee suffering. However, we must recognize that whatever path in life we choose, it will involve suffering. Even wealth and power cause suffering – both for others and for ourselves.

What can draw us to choose the life of a missionary, of someone who loves God and others even to the point of death? Ephesians lists five blessings God gives the converted (and for which the author blesses God). God adopts us as God's own children. We are forgiven. We know God's will. We become God's chosen people. The Holy Spirit lives in us. In short, we are loved. What else do we want, really and truly? And once we accept this, what else is there to do but to offer it to every person in the world?

- ❖ Is someone hurt by the lifestyle choices you have made? Consider both your home and the world.
- ❖ Is your goal today to keep things quiet or to shake things up with love, dangerous as that may be?

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. 2020. Penguin Random House. p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 39.