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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is a tradition in the Episcopal Church, and other denominations, too, that the preacher focus on the reading from the Gospel in the sermon. And I will get to the Gospel text, I promise. But this morning we encountered a reading from the prophet Amos in the Old Testament. And I LOVE Amos. Not just because he spoke so eloquently about the need to turn to seek God and the need to put commercial and military successes in their place. I love Amos because I can identify with him on a personal level. Amos, you see, had staked out a life; a comfortable life tending trees and tending sheep in a little town in Judah. And then in his mid-life he discerned what he felt was an irresistible call from God. I felt that kind of irresistible call, too. I know it's a call that a person can successfully avoid for only so long. It's the kind of call that won't leave you alone.

In my case, I ended up coming here from Richmond. In Amos' case, he ended up traveling about as far but he ventured into much more daring territory. As I mentioned, Amos lived in Judah. At the time that he lived, Israel was a divided kingdom. Israel was the kingdom in the north and Judah was the kingdom in the south. Israel was a wealthy nation that possessed military might and economic affluence. They attributed their successes to God, saw their prominence among the nations as a sign of God's favor; especially because of their "extravagant support of the official shrines."¹ But the support of the shrines was deceptive. There appeared to be a strong practice of faith, but people had moved away from worship. It played only a superficial role in their lives. God called upon Amos to go up to Israel from

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV translation, Oxford University Press ©1991, 1994, page 1170

Judah to preach that harsh reality; to call upon the leaders of the synagogues and the nation to turn once again toward God or face destruction.

In the 8th century BC, Amos had entered into a nation much like our own. The government was divided and yet the economies were thriving. Prosperity abounded. Needless to say, his words were not well received. And the words I share in this sermon might not be either. But then again, I'm not preaching to the heads of state or the heads of the church universal. I'm preaching to people who have done their best to turn to God. Or have we? Like the rich man in the story from the Gospel text, is there something that we are lacking in our faith?

Like the prosperous situation in Israel in the 8th century BC, the economy that the two King Herod's oversaw were thriving. King Herod the first ruled in the last half of the 1st century BC, the kingdom into which Jesus was born. Israel prior to that was an agrarian society, living largely off produce from the land. There were periods of hardship just like we've experienced in this country. But this was not one of those times. King Herod the first courted the investment of the Roman Empire and King Herod Antipas, the heir to the throne, wanted very much to keep that relationship alive. He was not as industrious and creative as his father, but he was manipulative and conniving in equal measure. He managed to keep the Roman economic interest in Israel alive.

And so it was that while most of the people were poor, there were people who were financially prosperous in Jesus time. Those who were found they could be prosperous while adhering to the Jewish law and tradition. They could attend synagogue worship and obey the commandments. It was as easy as checking off a to-do list. And prosperous people then, like prosperous people now, adhere to checklists; they get things done.

But then Jesus came along, and it seemed that Jesus wanted people to do more than check off a list. But what else could one do beyond what was required? The rich man was curious. He was curious enough to come humbly before Jesus and ask. He asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus listed off all the commandments of the law. To that, the rich man said, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

There it is, a completed checklist. This man had done everything he knew to do; everything that had been asked of him. He could not imagine that he had overlooked any requirement. But to his utter amazement, Jesus told him that he was lacking one thing. The man was truly shocked. He had presumed that he owed his prosperity to all that he had done to be obedient to God; all that he had done to provide for himself and his family. But apparently, that was not enough. Jesus told him to sell everything he owned and give the proceeds to the poor. Doing that, Jesus said, would lead him to eternal life. And then Jesus astounds his disciples by saying that it would be quite a challenge for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God. He said "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

Jesus was not against wealth. After all, how could the poor be lifted up without it? But he knew that the act of accumulating wealth does something to a person. A person can become completely immersed in the process - so much so that all kinds of relationships can get neglected; the relationship with a spouse, with a child, with our neighbor and, most significantly, with God. There is the danger that unless those relationships are intentionally put on the checklist of daily life that they will be forgotten. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, warned that the act of accumulating wealth has the capacity of corrupting rather than enabling virtue. In other words, we can become so enamored with the process of

accumulating wealth - and the worldly rewards that follow - that we can miss out on fully living life. We are meant to live a full life *with* and *for* each other.

As Christians, we believe that following Christ is our primary aim. To follow Christ is to put God first and that means that our careers, our families, our security and our wealth accumulation fall beneath that primary priority. Jesus tells that if we put God and neighbor first for his sake we will receive a hundredfold in this age - and in the age to come eternal life.

That's what Amos was saying to Israel, too. Maybe now it's time for the people of our nation and of our world to finally really hear this message. It is not enough for us in this room to hear it.

A friend was talking to me yesterday about voting, but her message applies to this message here just as easily. She said she told her daughter, "if you believe in someone or something, you need to tell people about it." I agree. If we believe this message from Jesus, shouldn't we be telling people about it? Shouldn't we invite people to come to church with us and get to know the Way of Jesus? In this time of division, of economic challenge, or political unrest, shouldn't we all be turning to the example set by Jesus? I, for one, think we should. I believe the Way of Jesus can lead us out of the division and dissension toward the kind of unity and justice God dreams for us.