

## “Embrace the Uncomfortable” (Amos 7:10-17) Pentecost 6, July 12, 2009

Socrates claimed that when we know what’s right, we’ll do what’s right. Sounds so easy, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, Socrates didn’t factor in social pressure. If everyone else is doing what’s right, that’s one thing. But when we find ourselves standing alone, that can be a whole different story!

Case in point: take this experiment by a school psychologist. In groups of ten, students were shown charts with lines on them and were told to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Except here’s the twist. Nine of the students were told beforehand not to vote for the longest line but for the second longest line. This meant that only the tenth student would really decide for himself. So guess what happened. Time after time, the tenth student would look at how the other nine were voting, frown in confusion, then raise his hand along with the rest. Even when the second line was significantly shorter, the tenth student went along with the rest 75% of the time, and this happened consistently with various age groups.

Surprising? Not really! No one likes to stand alone. We all know how uncomfortable it is to feel “different.” At any age, the need to fit in, to belong, to find acceptance – it’s powerful! So powerful it can short-circuit common sense. So powerful it can make us ignore what we know to be true – just to fit in with the crowd. That’s why we start out early warning kids to resist social pressure. “*Just because everyone else jumps off a cliff doesn’t mean you have to!*” But this warning is not just for kids! Adults are susceptible, too. In fact, the pressure on adults can be even more intense -- especially on Christian adults!

Let’s face it: in today’s culture, committed Christians aren’t exactly popular. Many frown upon our hard-and-fast rules, beliefs, and commitments. Spiritually, our culture prefers a cafeteria mentality. Pick and choose what you like, ignore what you don’t; go with whatever “works” for you. So, by and large people still say they believe in God and Jesus and heaven, but obeying God in the minute particulars, trusting Jesus come what may, treating life as preparation for heaven – that’s a whole different ball game. And often, they don’t have much patience with those of us who do take our Christian faith seriously. To them, we’re just too serious. Or to be more accurate, we’re just too consistent. How often do we hear, “You gotta go along to get along! You gotta compromise! You gotta be more open-minded!”? And what if we stick to our guns anyway? Then they pull out the heavy artillery! We’re called “old-fashioned,” “narrow-minded,” “rigid,” “intolerant,” “holier-than-thou,” even “bigots.” Who wants to be seen like that? And more to the point, who wants to be dismissed as “different”? Talk about uncomfortable! So yes, we may know what’s right, but it’s still tempting to go along in order to get along. At home, at work, among friends, raising kids, even as a church, it’s tempting to compromise our values! That’s how powerful social pressure can be! After all, even grown-ups want to fit in! Even grown-ups don’t like feeling uncomfortable.

Now, many Christians do recognize this pressure and the temptations that come with it. Some even say our situation is a lot like what the early Christians faced. But you know what? I think, in some ways, our situation is tougher. Certainly, it's more complicated. After all, back then the lines were clear. This was Christian; this was pagan. You were either one or the other. These days, the lines are blurred. We live in a culture that *calls* itself "Judeo-Christian" but has largely shaken off the biblical worldview. Many retain bits and pieces of it but juggle them along with incompatible ideas gleaned from Buddhism, Hinduism, paganism, even atheism. As a result, some call themselves "Christian" yet believe in works righteousness, reincarnation, praying to angels, contacting the dead. Some even call themselves "Lutheran," yet they reject the Gospel's clear teaching that Jesus is the one and only Savior, and they replace biblical morality with whatever society considers acceptable. So in that respect, our situation is much more complicated than what the early Christians faced. Actually, it's more like what the prophet Amos faced in Israel of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

That's the setting of our text. Specifically, we're in the royal temple at Bethel – the temple Jeroboam I set up when Solomon's kingdom split in two; a temple meant to rival the one in Jerusalem. Now, nearly two centuries later, Bethel is a place of splendor, reflecting the glorious reign of Jeroboam II. The people who come to Bethel consider themselves faithful believers. Yet truth be told, their religion is a mish-mash – partly taken from the teachings of Moses, but partly taken from the pagan worship of Ba'al. Why, in this temple you can even see a golden calf – supposedly a symbol of God, but, of course, also a symbol of Ba'al! Now, presiding over all this we see the chief priest, Amaziah. Presumably, Amaziah knows the teachings of Moses. Presumably, Amaziah sees how they're being ignored. So presumably, Amaziah has rationalized all this in some way or another. No doubt he preaches a positive message: *God loves you! God blesses you! God has chosen you as His very own!* All of which is true, and all of which the people love to hear. As for the stuff they don't want to hear – like: that it's wrong to worship Ba'al alongside God, it's wrong to oppress the poor, it's wrong to live lives of self-indulgence – well, that he doesn't mention. Amaziah doesn't want people to feel uncomfortable. And frankly, fearing a negative reaction, *he* doesn't want to feel uncomfortable, either.

So anyway, we're in the royal temple at Bethel. Some sort of festival is going on. And out of nowhere, the prophet Amos appears. Like the professional prophets, he stands up and starts preaching: **"For three sins of Damascus and for four," God "will not revoke the punishment..."** "Good preacher," Amaziah thinks. "Very patriotic! He will condemn our enemies, then bless our people. The folks will eat it up!" But once Amos condemns the enemies, he doesn't bless Amaziah's people. He says, **"For three sins of Israel and for four," God "will not revoke the punishment..."** "What?" Amaziah thinks, "Did I hear right? This prophet can't be crazy enough to condemn us!" But Amos does condemn Israel – and in no uncertain terms. He condemns their idolatry, injustice, and greed. Well, Amaziah needs to put the kibosh on that! He figures, "Even if what he says

*is true, this prophet is spoiling the mood! What will people think?"* So Amaziah draws up all his priestly dignity and commands Amos to stop: **"O seer, go! Flee to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom!"** Hearing this, Amos does stop...for a moment. He looks straight at Amaziah. And what a look in his eyes! Not fear. Not anger. It is a look of certainty! Certainty that he is speaking God's Word. Certainty that God's Word will come true. Certainty so strong that, far from backing down, Amos tells the chief priest that *he* needs to repent, and warns that if he doesn't, **"you yourself will die in an unclean land, and Israel will surely go into exile."**

So what happens next? Well, short-term, Amaziah wins this battle. Soon enough, Amos leaves. The festivities continue. The joyful mood returns. Before long, no one's feeling uncomfortable at all. That's short-term.

But now let's fast-forward a couple of decades – to the year 722 B.C. We're still in the temple at Bethel, yet what a change we see! The once-splendid temple is now just a charred pile of ruins. For you see, the Assyrians have conquered Israel, just as Amos had warned. They have looted and burned to their hearts' content. Now soldiers are rounding up prisoners to take home as slaves. In fact, we can picture a line of them being led away in chains. They shuffle along too slowly to please the Assyrian soldier in charge, so he shouts, "Get a move on! All of you!" – and shoves an old man in the direction he wants them to go. The old man trips over his chains. He lands face first in the dust. The Assyrian soldier just laughs and spits on him. "Get a move on!" he shouts again.

Do you recognize the old man? That is the chief priest, Amaziah. The Assyrians have stripped him of his robes, his power, his dignity. And as he gets up, looks around the temple one last time, we can only imagine what thoughts must be going through his mind. But certainly, there are thoughts that *should* be going through his mind! Shall we state them for the record? *Amaziah, what a fool you have been, saying what people want to hear instead of God's own truth! Amaziah, what a coward you have been, fearing people's disapproval instead of the consequences of sin! If only you had listened to Amos! If only you had taken God's Word to heart! This disaster might have been avoided! Instead, you'll be ending your days as a slave, wallowing in guilt and shame! And why? Because your need to fit in short-circuited your common sense. Your fear of being different made you ignore what you knew to be true! Now you see the results! And there are far worse things than feeling uncomfortable, aren't there?*

Indeed there are! And that's the lesson this bit of history teaches us. Being faithful is hard. Living a godly life is hard. Standing up to pressure is hard. But when we know what's right, we must do what's right – period! There are always consequences to our actions. Short-term, standing on God's Word may be uncomfortable. Standing against popular opinion can cost us our reputation and friends. But long-term, we are on the right side. Long-term, we are putting God

first. And long-term, God will honor those who honor Him. So the lesson here is to face the fact that being faithful is hard, accept that being Christian makes us different, but instead of seeking an easier way, to embrace the uncomfortable.

Yes, embrace the uncomfortable! Even with less important challenges, isn't that always the wisest course? Think about the first time you interviewed for a job. Or the first time you drove on the freeway. Or the first time you met your fiancé's parents. Was there any way that wasn't going to be uncomfortable? So looking back, how did you handle it? Or maybe I should ask: What would have been the best way to handle it? With some courage, right? With some grit. You go in knowing it's going to be hard, but it's worth it, so you just do it anyway. The wisest course is to embrace the uncomfortable!

And it's the same way in our Christian life! We all know the saying, "*Forewarned is forearmed.*" Well, didn't Jesus forewarn us to embrace the uncomfortable? What did He say about gaining the whole world and losing our own soul? What did He say about us being sent out as sheep amongst wolves? And didn't He specifically say, "**In the world you will have tribulation**"? You bet! We have been forewarned! But think how He's also forearmed us! Think of the promises we can hold onto. "**In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.**" And "**Lo, I am with you always.**" And "**My grace will be sufficient for you; My power will be made perfect in your weakness.**" "**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**" Jesus Himself said that standing firm in our faith will be uncomfortable, but it's worth it, so do it anyway. Jesus Himself said to embrace the uncomfortable!

And sometimes we need to remind ourselves of this. I don't know where anyone got the idea that the Christian life is supposed to be easy, but it's not. Being faithful is hard. Taking guff for it is hard. Resisting social pressure is hard. But it is worth it, and that's the point! Here on earth, it's worth it to live a life we can be proud of, a life that enriches others, a life that fulfills our potential. And in the light of eternity, it will be worth it infinitely more! When we stand before the Lord, see the delight in His eyes, hear Him say, "**Well done, good and faithful servant!**" – how glad we'll be then that we stood on *His* side! How glad we'll be then that we put *His* will first! How glad we'll be then that we stayed faithful!

You know, eternity's going to last a lot longer than any uncomfortable moments here on earth. So when push comes to shove, let's keep that in mind! Keep it in mind when others don't see why we won't just "go along to get along." Keep it in mind when our kids don't see why we're the only ones who won't let them do what all the other kids' parents let them do. Keep it in mind when even fellow Christians urge us to wink at God's rules and change with the times. For be assured: God *will* honor those who honor Him. Whatever pressures we face, whatever trials we endure, God will crown the faithful with glory. And that's what ultimately matters. So when push comes to shove, let's keep in mind what ultimately matters – keep it in mind and embrace the uncomfortable! Amen.

