



**VILLAGE**  
**CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# With Liberty and Justice For All

SCRIPTURE:  
AMOS  
5:18-24

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Oct. 27, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**A**mos, the prophet is having a rather bad day, but that's not atypical for a lot of the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures in the Old Testament. Amos is a prophet speaking the truth of God to Israel, the northern kingdom and the people of the northern kingdom. They're begging for the day of the Lord. They're saying to the prophet Amos, "When will the day of the Lord come? O God, send us the day of the Lord for the Hebrew people." The day of the Lord is the day of God's reckoning; the day of God's judgment. The people of the northern kingdom have enemies all around them and they are afraid to be invaded and taken over. They're pleading with Amos and with God, "O God, send your victory to us. Remove from us the threat of these enemies all around us."

And into that, Amos says, "Why do you ask for the day of the Lord?" It is not going to be a good day for you because apparently the Hebrews in the northern kingdom are doing the exact things that God does not want them to do. They are worshiping other idols as well as God just to hedge their bets. They're also mistreating (or neglecting) those among them who are poor, who are widows, who are orphans, those who are strangers. They're doing everything God does not want them to do.

So Amos says, "You be careful when you ask for the day of the Lord, for when that day comes, it may not be a great day for you." You can hear the Israelites, the people in the northern kingdom, asking, "Well, then, what does God want from us? God speaks to the prophet Amos and says, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." That's what God desires.

We're coming to the close of this sermon series, "Loving God and Loving Nation." I've taken words from our Pledge of Allegiance during the course of this series. We started off with: One nation. Then:

Under God, then Indivisible. Today it will be: Liberty and justice for all. In exploring the idea of liberty and justice for all, I wanted to start with 'liberty,' and it took me back to my seminary days. I read a lecture by a German Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. He was a German Lutheran pastor during the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. And sadly, the vast majority of the German Lutheran churches began to preach in their pulpits, classrooms, and Sunday school rooms that Adolf Hitler was sent by God to restore the pride and the prosperity of the German people. The German Lutheran church aligned herself directly with Nazism and the rise of the Nazi socialist party. But a handful of preachers, pastors, professors, and teachers (like Dietrich Bonhoeffer) said that their reading of scripture led them to the exact opposite belief: That Adolf Hitler and everything he preached and said and taught was against the gospel of Jesus Christ. For that, he was arrested and convicted of treason. He was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp 14 days before American soldiers liberated it. During his time of protest, the seminaries had also aligned themselves with Adolf Hitler and Nazism. So he began—with some other professors and pastors and teachers—an underground seminary.

One of his lectures was on the theme of liberty, freedom. Bonhoeffer said that we mistake liberty, freedom, as an individual right. The truth is because we are created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei* (Latin for the image of God), we are created with freedom not for ourselves, but freedom for relationship—freedom for relationship with God, and freedom for relationship with other people. Bonhoeffer helped me understand in his courage and in his strength that the idea of liberty is not an individual right. It is an opportunity for us to be in relationship with one another—to care for one another. That is

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the essence of liberty and freedom, as Christians understand it.

We as Americans think about our individualism when it comes to liberty and justice. Bonhoeffer helps us see that liberty actually means our ability to be in relationship with others—to care for others. I've seen that. I've seen that among you, this understanding of liberty.

Five years ago, some of you remember when there was a horrific terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, the capital. A lone gunman, out of anti-Muslim hate, went into two different mosques while women and children and men were in worship and he killed 51 and wounded 89 of them. It was a horrific event. New Zealand was stunned as was the rest of the world.

One of us, Jennifer, was having lunch with a good friend the next day and they were talking about this terrible incident, and how afraid Muslims must be—not just in New Zealand but around the world and they were moved to do something. After lunch, the two of them got a bunch of bouquets of flowers, and they went to the Islamic Center of Overland Park. They were going to lay the flowers at the entrance, as people often do, as a sign of kindness and compassion and solidarity. But as they were approaching the entrance to the Islamic Center, a group of Muslim women came out and greeted them. They explained they were Christian women and how horrified they were about what had happened the previous day in New Zealand—how they wanted to lay these bouquets here as an act of kindness and compassion, an act of righteousness and justice. The Muslim women were so moved, they burst out into tears. They joined together, held hands and prayed together.

Liberty is not so much our individual right as it is our opportunity to relate and care for others. That's why liberty and justice are aligned so beautifully in our Pledge of Allegiance. Liberty is not so much our individual right or our individual freedom as it is our opportunity to care for and be in relationship with others. That act was a courageous one on the part of Jennifer and her good friend because every time we stand up to evil, it takes courage.

When Pastor Tom told me that he was in conversation with the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago to become their interim senior pastor, I told him that Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago has

always had a special place in my heart.

He asked why, and I explained that in 1942—in the midst of war with Japan and Italy and Germany—there was a group of about 120 Japanese-Americans who were worshiping together, trying to form a Christian church in Chicago. There was no Japanese-American Christian Church, and for the past couple of years, they had been renting a storefront. But then Pearl Harbor happened and we were at war with the Empire of Japan. The man who rented the storefront to them, all of whom were American citizens, said they no longer could worship there. He told them to get out. They began looking around on the north side of Chicago for another place to rent and no one would rent to them. Even churches refused to let them use their space.

They talked to a man who was the president of Chicago Theological Seminary, and he said, “Why don't you try Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue?” So they talked to the Rev. Dr. H. Ray Anderson, then the senior pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church. Dr. Anderson met with them and realized that first of all, these are Christians and second, they are Americans, of Japanese descent, but they're Americans. So Dr. Anderson went to the session of the Fourth Presbyterian Church and he asked them, “Could we let these Japanese Americans worship in our chapel on Sunday afternoon?” The session was not of one mind. They debated this; they prayed about it. The story is that Dr. Anderson was pretty persuasive and he convinced them to say yes. And that at their first worship service in the chapel at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, he stood at the door to make sure they would be safe while they were worshiping our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

That story went out among Japanese Americans. I heard it when I was growing up in Seattle, and ever since then, the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago has had a special place in my heart. Many, many years later, I was privileged to preach there. I sat in that chapel, looked around, and I could feel the spirit of those who had come before me. I could feel some of their fear in 1942, but mostly I could feel their gratitude for the courage of that congregation and Dr. H. Ray Anderson for saying: These people should be welcomed here. Anytime you take a stand against evil, it takes courage.

There was a moment 14 years ago when Village

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Presbyterian Church was embarking on a search for an associate pastor. Tom Are was our senior pastor and the associate pastor nominating committee had a question. Several states in the country had already begun to recognize same-sex marriage, but not yet as a nation. There was every possibility that some of the candidates could be in same-sex marriages. So Tom brought the question to the session: Can this search committee consider a candidate who's in a same-sex marriage? The session debated it, thought about it, prayed about it, of course, and eventually decided, "Yes, just find the best person. Just call the best person. And if he or she happens to be in a same-sex marriage, then that's who you call. Just call the best person for us."

That word was shared with the congregation. Tom preached about it from this pulpit a couple of months later and not everyone was pleased. So we offered a talk-back session. He said, "Just come meet with me

and some of the elders from session in a few nights." And people showed up in Friendship Hall.

Tom remembers that the first person to stand up was a woman named Dottie Harberts. And Dottie stood up in a microphone and said, "I just want you to know I have always told my son that you would be welcomed here at my church, but I didn't know for sure until right now."

Anytime you take a stand against evil, it takes courage. So friends, God speaks to the prophet Amos and says to you and me, "Let justice roll down like waters and let righteousness flow like an everflowing stream." Loving God, loving nation, in the face of a rising tide of hate, we can be compassionate and kind and righteous with all justice because we are, by the grace of God, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all—by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.