

Sunday, July 21, 2013: Amos 8:1-12; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue

On a busy day recently I pulled into a gas station and filled up my car's gasoline tank. As I stood next to the car, I noticed that metallic stickers on the gas pump verified that the state department of weights and measures had tested the gasoline and approved its sale.

It's astonishing that we Americans can assume that a gallon of gas will be a gallon at every station—or that a pound of flour is a pound at every store. In contrast, Martin Luther often expressed indignation at the bad business practices of his time. "Those who can steal and rob openly are safe and free, unpunished by anyone, even desiring to be honored," Luther sighed, while "the petty sneak thieves who have committed one offense must bear disgrace and punishment to make the others look respectable and honorable." He singled out "shoddy merchandise," "crooked deals" and ordinary theft as forbidden by the seventh commandment. Many in our time would respond by saying that "it's impossible to legislate morality." But as every gas pump weights-and-measures certification reminds us, in some areas we try.

Luther's complaint is foreshadowed by the prophet Amos's condemnation of corrupt business in eighth-century Israel. It was a time of relative peace and prosperity in both Israel and Judah (there was a strong demand for ivory from abroad), but the prosperity did not reach the farmers and artisans. In fact, the new wealth and status of Israel's elite gave them unprecedented power over small farmers. Instead of honoring the new moon and the Sabbath as respites from work for the farmers, the elite tried to cancel these observances so as to gain an advantage over other businessmen. Amos accused them of selling fraudulent measures of grain at inflated prices, of practicing debt slavery and of selling even the "sweepings of the wheat" that, according to Leviticus, should go to the poor and landless.

We live in a very different world today, yet we don't need to strain all that hard to hear echoes of Amos's accusations. Then as now, debt is a powerful tool of exploitation. The stories of abusive mortgage lending practices in the run up to the housing market crash have a dark prophetic ring. Recent reports tell us that for-profit universities sought out homeless and mentally ill veterans to register and

receive guaranteed student loans that they would never be able to repay.

These behaviors are worthy of “the Amos treatment.” From outright fraud to the more subtle abuse or evasion of laws and regulations, we see signs not just of economic inequality but also of a more ordinary inequity. The fact of economic inequality may or may not be a cause for concern. But when that inequality ends up hindering the ability of ordinary people to work for a reasonable living, save money reliably, own a home or conduct business on a level playing field, it has become inequity, or unfairness, and that’s a problem.

In the midst of the ill-gotten luxuries and economic abuses, Amos threatens “not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” The people will go “to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east.” The punishment for economic abuses will not be future poverty but something even worse—the silence of God.

The famine in not hearing God may be a famine of the very idea of equity, justice, fair play and decent regard for the orphan and widow. Without the prophetic word, injustice becomes its own law or ideology. When a correction is demanded by a political or economic crisis rather than by the God of justice, no one will recognize that famine or be able to correct the situation.

It’s an intriguing text to set beside the famous exchange between Jesus and Martha in today’s Gospel reading. What if Jesus is *not* imparting spiritual truths to Mary while Martha tends busily to worldly matters? What if instead he is sharing the prophetic word that may even then have been absent from the land? Toil is a constant in human existence, while just reward for toil is highly variable. The reward for work may be reduced or removed at any time through no fault of the one who toils—the loss of millions of homes, jobs and pensions attests to this reality. When that happens, as Luther knew, it happens under the cloak of honor and respectability.

Perhaps the “better part,” the one thing that cannot be taken away from the faithful, is the divine and jealous sense of fairness and kindness that perseveres even when the historical moment is one that’s poor in mercy because the powerful cease to hear the prophetic call.