



*"...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live..."
(Ecclesiastes 9.3)*

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?
(Micah 6.6,8)*

healing our brokenness inadequately (part 12):

a homily on just society and our mad state of rebellion

Mythology of america's capitalistic sorcerers:

Price gouging, price controls, the sacralization of profit, and the secularization of people

amos 8.4-6

*"They heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
'It's OK! It's OK!'
But nothing is OK!" (Jeremiah 6.14, author's translation).*

Introduction to the series

Judicial inequality and injustice. Economic inequality and injustice. Rampant greed and fraud on the part of wealthy individuals and essential institutions. Bribery and corruption of government officials. Inordinate influence of the wealthy on laws and public policy. Unjust laws and policies favoring the powerful and influential while disadvantaging the less powerful and influential. The infliction of the vulnerable with hunger, homelessness, sickness, and anxiety. Self-righteous justification of the mad state of rebellion. Stubborn refusal to acknowledge these and a host of other societal ills.

No, I am not talking about America of 2024. However, if the shoe fits...

I am talking about late 6th and early 5th century B.C. Judah. These, and many other evils undermined the temporal, moral, and spiritual health of the nation. All the signs were there. The nation was on the verge of collapse. It was in desperate need of truth, however sour it might be to the national palate. But the nation's shepherds fed the populace an empty diet of propagandistic myths of nationalism and materialism. Many of Israel's prophets joined the fray. Israel's watchmen, Jeremiah charged,

“Heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:

‘It's OK! It's OK!’”

“But nothing,” Jeremiah replies, “is OK!”

Does this, too, sound familiar? Strike close to home? It should. Too often, today's religious leaders—whether they go by the name, “prophet,” “priest,” or “pastor”— seem to lack both discernment and courage. They seem utterly blind to and mute about sin and evil, unless, of course, it involves some form of real or imagined sexual deviance. If they do speak out on matters of social justice, it is often with muted, vague, delicate, and generalized voices and statements. These shepherds seem not up to the challenging task of bold and clear truth telling of the sort that our society so desperately needs. But now is not the time for delicacy and caution.

This homily is the twelfth in an ongoing series entitled, “Healing Our Brokenness Inadequately,” based on Jeremiah 6.¹⁴ In this series, we explore specific examples of individual and societal sins about which political and religious leaders all too often remain willfully blind or, if sighted, stubbornly mute... and therefore complicit. Tragically, sometimes their complicity is even active and enthusiastic. With these examples in mind, we will often call upon the classic Hebrew prophets as well as other ancient and not so ancient prophets to speak as if from the dust. We read these discerning writings in light of the societal ills and injustices that abound in our modern world. Sometimes we even imagine and take a stab at replicating what a Hebrew prophet might have to say if he were to come to us from the past.

In today's homily, we offer an additional example of our brokenness about which too many remain silent and worse, in which too many religious leaders engage in and benefit from themselves. Such moments as ours desperately cry out for the type of discernment, boldness, and truth-telling so characteristic of the Hebrew prophets.

Policing price-gouging

The American right is at it again. Raising the laughable specter of “communism.” It happens anytime decent people stand up for the downtrodden against the legalized down treading that the wealthy, influential, and powerful perpetrate against them. Unfortunately, America's “left,” (while there is a cultural left, there is no economic left in America, and certainly none left enough for yours truly—hence the quotation marks), as it always is, will most likely be intimidated and cowed into retreat. Those on the “left” are too often as mesmerized and star-struck by the mythic sacralization of profit as their more proudly avaricious and less hypocritical compatriots on their right.

What is the nature of the left's most recent foray into the red of communism? Its presidential candidate as had the audacity to suggest that the ravenous price gouging of America's rapacious businesses ought to be halted. Put differently, the crime of price gouging ought to be policed—the right is really into policing, or so they claim. Imagine that... the one condemning price gouging is attacked more than the price gougers! Rather than retreating, perhaps the left could step up and confess that the idea of policing the crime of price gouging is not communistic, but moral. And it is most certainly biblical, even if it isn't very American.

We have on several occasions utilized the following passage to address several of the many modern economic iniquities that plague our society. Today we use it in relation to the very biblical proposal of one of the U.S. presidential candidates that U.S. legislators, shepherds of their flock, ought to stand against and police price gouging and end harmful and immoral greedflation.

“Hear this, those who weary the impoverished
to the end that they ruin the land’s downtrodden—
thinking: “when will the new moon sabbath be over
so that we can sell grain;
and the weekly sabbath
so that we can make our produce available,
while shrinking the size of the dry measure,
increasing the weight of šeqel,
and rigging fraudulent scales
to buy the underprivileged with money
and the impoverished at the cost of a pair of sandals.
We will even sell worthless debris mixed in with the grain!”¹

This is prophetic advocacy for quality controls, quantity controls, and price controls. It is a prophetic call for the policing of price gouging. Now, before applying this prophetic call to ourselves, as scripture so clearly expects us to do, we should take a moment to examine the process of wheat production, selling, and buying that underpins this passage.

In Amos’ day, after wheat was harvested from the field it was taken to a threshing floor where it was winnowed. During this winnowing process, wheat was repeatedly thrown into the air, allowing the wind to blow away the wheat husks and other debris that had mixed with the wheat kernels during the harvesting process. While the debris was blown away, the nutritious wheat grain itself fell to the ground where it was collected and prepared for sale. Winnowing, then, was meant to produce a quality produce for sale.

Amos informs us that wheat sellers either skipped this winnowing process or somehow performed it so that the wheat they sold contained husks and other debris mixed in with the wheat kernels. By either not winnowing at all or winnowing less, the seller saved money and increased profits by reducing the labor costs associated with winnowing. In addition, by mixing useless and nutrition-less debris with good nutritious wheat, wheat sellers were able

¹ Amos 8. 4-6, author’s translation

to stretch their grain out over more sales and even further increase their profit margins.

But in their drive for increased profit margins, Israelite merchants did not stop there. Wheat sellers engaged in additional unethical business practices. They falsified their weights and measures and the tools they utilized in weighing and measuring. We can easily visualize the unethical business practices that Amos describes. We will first describe how the transaction between a buyer and seller of wheat was conducted.

The buyer came to the seller and requested a certain measure of wheat (we will say a “pound” to make it relatable), for which the buyer agreed to pay one shekel (in the pre-coinage era, a weight, not coin) of silver. The merchant placed a one-pound weight on the left side of a heavy-duty commercial scale used to measure dry goods. This caused the left scale to lower. He then began to add wheat to the right side of the scale. The left rose, the right side lowered until, finally, the two sides sat next to each other at equilibrium. The seller then dumped the wheat from the scale into a receptacle for transport.

Now, it was time for the buyer to pay. The seller placed a weight equivalent to a shekel on one side of a second smaller, light-duty commercial scale used to weight metal. The buyer placed their silver on the other side of the scale until the two sides were at equilibrium. The buyer could then leave with their wheat. All this was acceptable business practice.

However, in the transaction as Amos describes it, the one-pound weight that the merchant used to measure the wheat was not, in fact, a full pound, but, say, $7/8$ a pound, thus cheating the buyer of the amount of wheat for which they paid. In addition, the merchant manipulated his scales in some way so that the two sides were slightly out of equilibrium to begin with. Therefore, our customer walked away with something even less than the already scant $7/8$ pounds of wheat.

Contrary to American practice of mythification, Amos does not chalk such behavior up to “market forces” as if economics were a matter of natural law akin to, say, the law of gravity. This unethical behavior was a volitional choice of human beings. It could only flow out of

human lust for increased profit margins that overrode every other consideration, including the impact such practices had on real people and society at large. Amos viewed the merchants' unethical business practices not only in economic terms but in spiritual and religious terms as well. This unethical behavior was sinful wickedness, a breach against humanity as well as rebellion against God.

Amos demands an end to such practices. By calling for an end to such practices, the prophet is engaged in an ancient form of price control. He expects government and business leaders to regulate, or police prices and end price gouging. This is consistent with the law codes of the Hebrew Bible.

“You are not to engage in injustice in regard to administering the measurement of length, weight, or volume. You are to possess accurate balances, accurate weights, accurate dry measures, and accurate liquid measures. I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”²

When those who governed in Israel failed to uphold such laws and, worse, actually wrote laws in such ways as to “legalize” the sort of behavior that Amos so clearly condemns as ungodly, the Hebrew prophets were not shy about calling out those leaders.

“A tragic Warning! To those who issue oppressive statutes
and continuously write laws that afflict;
that put redress out of the reach of the underprivileged
and rob the poor among my people of justice,
making prey of widows
and plundering orphans”³

How very badly we need religious leaders to truly take up the mantle of the Hebrew prophets!

² Leviticus 19.³⁵⁻³⁷; author's translation

³ Isaiah 10.¹⁻²; author's translation

We do not deny the merchant's right to a profit. But we do deny, and expect moral people everywhere to deny, the sorts of profits that have been a part of our latest battle with inflation. In these most recent battles with inflation, some increases in costs have been due to various continuing disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic. Some increases in costs, for example, have been due to continuing supply chain disruptions. These are facts (We do question the "fact" that the increases in costs were *significantly* due to people having too much money, which is rather like blaming the victim rather than the victimizer).

But it is also a fact, demonstrated over and over again, that not an insignificant portion of inflated prices went well beyond extra costs of production, labor, transportation, etc. Not only did prices go up, profit margins went up as well, in many cases exorbitantly. Rather than being used to make capital and customer service improvements, these exorbitant profits served to increase pay for CEO's of questionable usefulness and necessity, and increased returns for shareholder of insatiable appetite. A not insignificant portion of price increases that have afflicted so many worldwide have been the consequence of greed—some suggesting up to half of the increased costs stemmed from greed—making "greedflation" an apt and accurate term.

Tragically, unjust laws have in no small part facilitated this greedflation. One example will have to suffice. Chicken. The wizards of economics demand that government get out of the way of business and let "the market" dictate practices, including pricing. The consumer, the mythology goes, is one of many controllers of costs. If the cost of chicken, for example, grows too high, the consumer will stop buying, or buy from a competitor. But, this has two major problems.

First, "consumers," who business treats as objects rather than people, must eat. We can't stop buying food—or housing, or any number of other necessities—because it is expensive. Second, at the behest of unscrupulous economic sorcerers, legislators and the judiciary have gutted anti-monopoly laws. Because of this gutting, in the example of chicken, there are

limited suppliers of chicken. Consumers cannot go to a competitor to buy cheaper chicken, because there are few competitors, and those that might exist are engaged together in what amounts to legalized price fixing with their one or two “competitors.” In many industries, “competition” is nonexistent.

Well, we could go on and on critiquing the collusion between government and business that harms citizens and consumers. The harmful collusion took off with the venerable rightwing Ronald Reagan and the economic sorcerers who cast their devious spell upon him. Since then, with ever increasing insistence, all restraint upon business and their profits and profit margins have become anathema—the restraint being more evil than the immoral conduct itself. Even so-called leftist, such as Bill Clinton or Barak Obama have listened as economic wizards whispered lies into their willing ears. People all over the world have been sold out, becoming slaves to profit margins.

“They sell out the innocent in order to turn a profit.

They sell out the impoverished in order to acquire a pair of sandals.

They lust after the dirt

that is found in the hair of the poor,

and make the life of those already distressed even more precarious.”⁴

Worse, people all over the world have been chopped up into little pieces and fed to the ungodly and ravenous beast of laissez faire capitalism.

“I am warning: Ya‘^aqōb’s elite must listen right now,

along with Yiśrā’ēl’s governing officials:

Isn’t it incumbent on You to determine what is just—

the very ones who hate what is beneficial and love what is harmful;

the very ones who strip their skin right off them,

and their flesh from off their bones;

⁴ See Amos 2.⁶⁻⁷, author’s translation.

the very ones who have eaten my people's flesh,
stripped their skin right off them,
snapped their bones,
chopped them into little pieces to fit in a pot,
as meat in a caldron.”⁵

The Hebrew prophets would never stand silent in the face of such inhumane barbarism. Those who would claim their mantle today cannot remain silent without being shown, like the proverbial emperor without clothes, to be naked, without prophetic mantle or divine truth.

Conclusion

We do believe, as Hebrew prophets such as Amos did, that profits and especially profit margins should be regulated, policed. It is humane. It is moral. It is right. It is biblical. Before the nation gave itself to bestiality, it was once American.

Now, make no mistake about it. In the attempt to control inflation, the U.S. government through its Federal Reserve has been engaged in “price control.” The fed has sought to control prices by raising interest rates. So, the idea that “price controls” is inappropriate is a lie. The idea that it is some kind of evil communist plot is a lie. But, the Fed's method of price control has disproportionately and most harmfully impacted regular people, especially vulnerable people—have a look at chicken, again, or the cost of housing.

Somehow, the economic sorcerers have convinced everyone that policing pricing by policing the consumer is not only appropriate but mandatory. It is righteous. At the same time, these wizards have convinced everyone that policing the seller in order to control prices is not only inappropriate and unnecessary, but is downright wicked, communistic. What a marvelous slight of hand! What a magnificent piece of mythmaking?

But we claim a wisdom that is higher and nobler than the myths that the wizards of economy

⁵ Micah 3. 1-3, author's translation

whisper into the willing ears of businessmen, legislators, and judges. We reject the wizard's myth and magical thinking that sacralizes profit and secularizes human beings. We reject the false doctrine that maximizing profit is righteous. We reject the lie that profits are sacrosanct and must not be policed in any way. We reject the wealthy's claim of innocence and righteousness.

“A merchant with an inaccurate scale at hand
enjoys defrauding.
And, 'Eprayim thinks, “I'm rich! I have discovered the source of power!
With all my profits,
no one will identify my abuse as sin.”⁶

We reject the blasphemy that wealth, however high it is piled, can hide a multitude of sins.

It is just such slights of hand that the Hebrew prophets rejected. When they observed prices increase—often at the same time that product decreased in quantity and quality—they looked to the seller. They examined the seller's behavior and business practices. They demanded that their behavior and business practices be reformed. They did not, as so many false prophets have and do, heal the brokenness of human nature inadequately. They did not remain mute. They did not call “OK,” what was not OK. May it be so today.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁶ Hosea 12.⁷⁻⁸, author's translation.