My sermon for this morning is based on our First Lesson, from Amos Chapter 8. Before I lift up my text from this First Lesson, let me say a bit about the man, Amos. I have affection for him. He is kind of a hero for me. He was one of the great eighth century BC prophets. So we are speaking about one of the early prophets of the LORD, just a couple centuries after King David.

Amos is a farmer, except that for a while, the LORD has removed Amos from his sheep and animals and the trees he takes care of, and launched him into a ministry of prophecy. The LORD has taken Amos away from his homeland, which is in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and sent him to the Northern Kingdom of Israel to preach against the greed and religious pretending and injustice in the land. Well, the authorities in that land do not much like Amos, and so they send him packing. I picture him returning to his farm in Tekoa, picking up where he left off. He could say to himself, “I served the LORD when I was a prophet, and I mean to serve the LORD now that I am a farmer again. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

The New Jerusalem Bible has a nice note about Amos and his style of preaching. The note goes this way:

A true son of the countryside, rough, direct, proud, rich in the imagery of country-dwellers, Amos in the name of God condemned corrupt city life, social injustice, [and] the deceitful consolations of insincere ceremonial.  

Amos spoke in a way that was natural for him, with the gifts of language and thought his Maker had given him. He addressed particular people and particular problems in an ancient land, but the Holy Spirit was with the man and his preaching. The LORD took the preaching of Amos and made it useful for us, all these centuries later. Our friend theologian David Yeago has put the matter this way:

The Holy Spirit worked with the human authors of Scripture, weaving their purposes into his own, so that their human words

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bear witness to Christ in ways that reveal not only their own minds but the mind of God who was intent on Christ from the beginning.  

So, Amos spoke his mind to the leaders and people of Israel. He pulled no punches. He spoke with power and with eloquence. And in speaking as he did, he also teaches us about our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amos teaches us that Jesus does not like injustice in the land.

And so it is that we come to my text for this sermon. I cannot bring myself to choose just one line from our short reading. The whole reading is too good to miss. Amos says this:

4Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end,
5saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, 6that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?"
7The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”

From this reading, let us conclude that Jesus does not want injustice in the land. We know that Jesus preaches love — that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Well, here we learn some more details about what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. We learn that we should not cheat or rip people off. Through Amos we learn that the LORD will never forget such unjust deeds. This will not stand — this unfairness.

Recently I read an article in Sports Illustrated about a prominent athlete. There is much that is troubling about this man, especially his conduct toward women. But there are other troubles too: lawsuits and disappointments for all kinds of people over the years against this athlete. A chef, a physical trainer, a painter — the article suggested that they had all been ripped off by this guy. As I was reading through this history I came upon a line that seemed to perfectly summarize what ails this athlete. The words were spoken by an

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2 The Bible as the Word of God, 2018, https://thenalc.org/nalc-statements/#wordofgod
attorney for someone who had been left in the lurch by the athlete. The attorney put things this way:

“There’s something wrong with him,” [the lawyer said] “He doesn’t feel like he has to pay working-class people.”

This athlete makes millions upon millions of dollars each year. Many of us will work our entire lives and will make only the tiniest fraction of what this man makes in a single year. Yet he does not feel like he has to pay working-class people. He seems to feel that it is his right to run roughshod over people who are just struggling to get by.

I hope this athlete repents. For all I know, he might end up in prison. But one way or the other, I hope he repents, right away. I hope he tries to settle up and compensate everyone he has wronged. Going forward, I hope that he tries to live a holy life. Because this will not stand— this unfairness. Jesus will not permit it in the athlete. He will not permit it in you and me if we have been doing wrong. The unjust person will surely live to regret the days of injustice.

Theologian Gilbert Meilaender describes the virtue of justice in terms of a settled inclination to be fair to others. He puts things this way:

... the virtue of justice, with its steady, habitual determination to make space in life for the needs and claims of others.

It was failures of justice, failures to make space in life for the needs and claims of others, that afflicted ancient Israel back in the days of Amos. The strong were stepping on the poor:

4Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end,

It is important for us to know that Jesus will not let this stand. If we are trampling upon the needy and bringing the poor of the land to an end, we should stop it.

It is a matter of pity. Jesus wants us to reflect in our lives the pity he feels for everyone, especially for those who are poor and weak. Our God “has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy” (Psalm 72:13). Jesus was a man of pity. What happened in the heart of Jesus when he heard the blind men calling out for his help? Listen to how St. Matthew puts it:

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And Jesus stopped and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him. (Matthew 20:32-34, RSV)

And when Jesus heard the cry of the leper, he did likewise:

And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. (Mark 1:40-42, RSV)

Indeed, it seems to have been pity — pity finally for our whole human race — that caused the final words of Jesus to be these:

Father, forgive... (Luke 23:34, KJV)

Let us train our eyes to see as Jesus does. Then we will never want to run over the poor or the weak. Let us train our eyes to see others as future inhabitants of heaven with us. There, in heaven, we might well finding ourselves bowing humbly before... the delivery people of this world, the doormen, the stock clerk, the check-out person, the policeman who stands in the intersection on a blazing hot day trying to smooth the flow of traffic, the barber, the migrant orchard worker, the nurse’s aid, the home health worker, the one who mops the subway car at the end of the line—all kinds of people who might not have much money or great prospects in life, but who are loved and counted precious by Jesus. He does not want them to be treated unfairly. And for all we know, they might be walking closer to Him than we are so far.

Jesus is pretty blunt about the matter in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. He says that we have a basic choice to make. It is a choice that we must make day by day. Jesus ends our Gospel Lesson with these words:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Luke 16:13, RSV)

Our highest loyalty must go to Jesus. Let us choose Jesus, not money. Altogether, we should not count money to be more important than treating people fairly.

All these years have passed, even centuries now, and still the call of Jesus remains true for us: We cannot serve God and mammon. Sometimes we are
forced to choose one or the other. This is a challenge that can trip up even seasoned Christians. Some Christians go to pieces, for example, when they suffer a financial setback. On the other hand, some Christians can say and truly mean it in the depths of their souls: “God will provide.” Let us be the second kind of person.

As for Jesus himself, he has already made his choice. He made it most starkly and forever on the cross. Jesus has chosen you and me. He counts us, and he counts every person on our globe, to be more valuable to him than money or fame or even his own life. Now, through his prophet Amos and through his own preaching, he asks us to join him in cherishing our neighbors, rich and poor alike. As far as lies possible with us, let there be no more unfairness in the land, in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.