

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
GATED
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Amos 5:10-15

During the American Revolution, Charles Lynch served as a justice of the peace and oversaw the county court in Bedford County, Virginia. Lynch was a wealthy landowner and tobacco farmer. He served in the Virginia militia as a colonel. While he was a judge during the Revolutionary War, Lynch and several other militia officers rounded up suspects in southern Virginia who were thought to be part of an uprising by those loyal to the British. These suspects that they gathered were given a summary trial at an informal court. Sentences handed down included whipping, property seizure, coerced pledges of allegiance, and conscription into the military. These actions were taken outside the bounds of any judicial process. In other words, it wasn't legal. Lynch defended his efforts as being necessities of war.

In time, Lynch became concerned that he might be charged for these actions so he appealed to his friends in the Congress of the Confederation. (This was the precursor to the Congress we have today.) He requested that they protect him and his associates. The Congress did so and passed a law which proved to be extremely controversial. The law became known as Lynch's Law. It is from this that we get the term lynch or lynching.

Originally, the term lynch described the organized but unauthorized punishment of criminals. Particularly in the American West, lynchings were used to serve "frontier justice" in places where courts did not exist. A person would be tried and lynched but not necessarily killed. The punishment was more often "tarring-and-feathering, beatings, and floggings."

However, starting in the 1830s, the meaning of the word lynch shifted. It came to describe something different. Lynching came to identify non-judicial, premeditated murder committed by a group of people. Typically, the form of murder was hanging, although it could be by shooting, stabbing, beating, drowning, or any other means. Although the perpetrators argued that they were taking the law into their own hands, the law had little to do with it.

In the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, most of the victims of lynchings were white men. This changed during the Civil War and Reconstruction and even into the 1940s and 50s when the victims of lynchings were mostly African-American. Lynchings were predominantly carried out in the South.

Quantifying lynchings in our country is complicated. Records are incomplete or intentionally non-existent. It doesn't help that coroners would often list the cause of

death for a hanging victim as suicide. The best numbers available right now tell us that in the United States, between 1877 and 1950, within twelve Southern states, there were 4084 racial terror lynchings which can be documented. The real number is likely much higher. There were also about 300 lynchings outside the South during this time period.

Lynchings are a form of terrorism. Their purpose is to instill fear into a group of people, usually a specific race of people. Most lynchings in the U.S. were acts of murder carried out with impunity, sometimes in broad daylight, often on the courthouse lawn. No lynching can be justified as "frontier justice" if they are committed in a community where there is a functioning criminal justice system. Terror lynchings were horrific acts of violence whose perpetrators were rarely held accountable. Many lynchings were held as public spectacles. One lynching in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1919, was announced in the newspaper. The front-page headline read, "John Hartfield will be lynched by Ellisville mob at 5 o'clock this afternoon." Public lynchings were attended by hundreds if not thousands of people in a carnival-like atmosphere with vendors selling food. At some lynchings, printers set up shop and sold souvenir postcards of the actual event. I found several of these postcards for sale on ebay.

This week, I reviewed numerous accounts of lynchings. They are all horrific. Most were not against any convicted criminal, but rather heinous acts of evil—whites seeking to establish racial dominance over blacks, to prevent blacks from voting, from having businesses, from competing for jobs, from entering certain sections of town, for even living in a community. I am not going to read to you any of the reports of specific lynchings. They are all horrific. Rarely are they just simple hangings. They usually involved violence and prolonged torture.

Sadly, lynchings work. They do induce terror. Blacks fled some towns and even evacuated entire counties. In the first half of the 1900s, lynchings fueled the mass migration of millions of black people from the South up to the North and out to the West.

More than half of lynchings victims were killed under the accusation of committing a serious crime. After their deaths, predictably, many were found to be innocent.

Hundreds of blacks also died in mass killings across the South, often for simply attempting to exercise their right to vote.

Many African-Americans were lynched on the thin accusation of minor social infractions. These lynchings, like all, were clearly a tool of racial control designed to enforce social norms and racial hierarchy.

- In 1940, Jesse Thornton was lynched in Luverne, Alabama, for referring to a white police officer by his name without the title of “mister.”
- In 1916, in Cedarbluff, Mississippi, Jeff Brown was lynched for accidentally bumping into a white woman as he ran to catch a train.

Lynchings are not simply acts of murder, but they represent the decay of society, they reveal the abandonment of true justice. When the mob is allowed to exert its power, justice disappears. And that brings us to the prophet Amos and his words on justice.¹

In the ancient Middle East, cities constructed walls for protection. Without a wall the city was vulnerable to attack from armies and bandits. A walled city offered security for its inhabitants. Walls, however needed gates to allow the residents ingress and egress from the city. Space inside a city was limited and crowded and a town’s gate provided a crucial community gathering point. The gate was where people tended to hang out. At the gate, you would see everyone entering and leaving the city. The gate was a good place to share news and gossip and visit with friends. The gate was also the place to do business. The elders of the city—you know, the group that gathers at Hardee’s for coffee—they would gather at the gate. If you needed witnesses for a land transaction or a divorce, you would go to the gate. Those elders at the gate could be called upon to act as judges for people with disputes. For example, we read in the book of Deuteronomy: *If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate* (Deut 21:18-21). The gate served as the heart of the life of the community. A healthy city had a healthy gate. A healthy gate was a place of justice.

Our reading for today begins with Amos’ words denouncing the corruption of justice that he witnesses at the gate of the city of Samaria, the capital of Israel. Amos is the 7th century BC prophet who traveled to Israel to proclaim God’s word to the wealthy and powerful of that nation. These people had turned away from God. The list of their transgressions is long—they abused the vulnerable for their own profit, they betrayed the innocent for money, they sold the needy for a pair of sandals, they oppressed the weak.

About these people, Amos tells us that they hate when the truth is spoken at the gate. Why? Because they profit off of lies and corruption. The gate should be a place for truth, but these people use their power and money to twist the system to their benefit. Amos complains that at the gate, the innocent are unable to obtain

justice, the judges are bribed, and those who come seeking assistance are shoved aside and ignored. Justice cannot be found at the gate.

When we think of justice, we tend to think of balance. Someone injures me so I should be able to hurt them back. That seems fair—then the scales of justice are balanced. We view justice as something that we create ourselves through our laws and systems. We make justice.

The prophet Amos, however, views justice in a different way. For him, justice is not something we make, but justice is a divine quality created by God. It is an underlying foundation of our world. Just as God poured out the waters of the sea at creation, so God poured out justice. Justice doesn't go away or evaporate, but it can get covered up and lost.

Imagine a beautiful meadow full of wildflowers. But then people start dumping their garbage on the meadow until the meadow is buried under a sea of trash. Technically, the meadow is still present; it is there; it is just hidden under the trash. To experience the beauty of the meadow, the trash must be removed. This trash is the injustice that covers up the beautiful thing that God poured out.

We believe that God is love. And God is indeed love. But love requires justice. I can't love my neighbor unless there is a just relationship between us. God's justice demands a way of living in which all people are treated fairly and equally, where the powerful don't abuse their power for their own gain. When justice at the gate is buried, society becomes broken.

Injustice is evil; it is sin; injustice is the opposite of God. Amos calls the people to *seek God so that they may live*. How do we seek God? Amos explains. If you want to live with God, to live as God's people, to inhabit God's kingdom, then you must *Hate evil*. We must turn our hearts against sin. We must no longer tolerate transgression. We can no longer accept the presence of evil in our world.

Second, we must *Love God*. We must love God with all our being. As we read in Deuteronomy, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*. Hating evil is not enough; we must also love our God.

Third, Amos commands us to *Establish justice in the gate*. I believe it is safe to say that no one here has participated in a lynching. But what are you doing to establish justice in the gate? We lead good lives; we treat people fairly and with respect. But what are we doing to remove the generations of trash that has been dumped in the meadow—the slavery, the lynchings, the continued oppression and discrimination? What are we doing to dismantle that which obstructs God's justice?

But, when we do witness injustice, do we speak out? That was a one problem with lynchings—they enforced a code of silence among whites. No one spoke about

them. We still don't. I certainly didn't learn about lynchings in my high school history classes in Alabama. Civil War history was mostly about battles. The only thing I was taught about Reconstruction was about the evil carpetbaggers.

Amos tells us that in evil times *the prudent will keep silent*. How many of us are prudent and choose to keep silent in the face of injustice?

Over the past two months, our nation has witnessed a wave of protests in every corner of our land. People are marching in the streets to voice their opposition to systemic racial injustice. They are demanding that the injustices of the past be removed from God's holy meadow so that all in our country—no matter who they are—may enjoy true justice—God's justice.

If we hope to inhabit God's kingdom, to enjoy God's salvation—to live—then we must seek to do as Amos commands and *Hate evil. Love God. Establish justice in the gate.*²

² Sources: lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/
[Lynchings in Tennessee - tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/lynching/](http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/lynching/)
[Lynching in Lebanon, Tennessee - www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2016/04/14/century-ago-lynching-lebanon/82514792/](http://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2016/04/14/century-ago-lynching-lebanon/82514792/)