

**AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL**  
**IDLE**  
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Amos 6:1-14

About a year ago, I was attending a function for some ministers. At my table, seated next to me was a minister I had not met before—a woman—and we talked and discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance. I knew this acquaintance socially, and this woman knew this person through a business venture. This minister that I was talking with was African American and she was telling me about a particular business dealing with this man and how it had been rather odd. Her implication was that he had acted in a certain way because she was black and he was white. I said, “I know this man, and he can be difficult, but I don't think that he is racist.” She said to me, “Well, maybe not, but he certainly is not anti-racist.” Now, I have to admit, I had never heard that term before—anti-racist. But I understood her meaning immediately, and I reflected on it for a moment and I agreed with her saying, “Yes, you are probably right.” He wasn't.

Since that conversation a year ago, I have come to hear and encounter this word more frequently. I have come to appreciate that it is a powerful concept.

So, what exactly is anti-racism? One definition that I like defines anti-racism as “the practice of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism.”<sup>1</sup> I like that it defines anti-racism as a practice—that means it is something that should be done continually, in which we identify, we challenge, and we change those unjust behaviors in our society which perpetuate systemic racism.

That mutual acquaintance that I mentioned earlier—I argued that I didn't believe him to be a racist. He could be difficult with anyone. But he was also a man of wealth and success and influence. And while not a racist, I never knew this man to use his influence to oppose the racism in our society. And he was certainly in a position to affect change if he so desired.

There is a book that I believe that a majority of us have read and that is the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Written by Harper Lee and published in 1960, this book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. It has become required reading for several generations of middle schoolers largely because it tells its story through the memories of a 6-year-old girl. Oprah Winfrey has tagged this book as “America's

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aclrc.com/antiracism-defined>.

From the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat (Canada).

novel.” *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of my favorites. Every five or so years, I will find my old ratty, paperback and reread it.

The story is set in the 1930s in the fictional south Alabama town of Maycomb, the seat of Maycomb County. In reality, the town is actually Monroeville, Alabama—Harper Lee’s home. Her story centers on the Finch family—daughter Scout (the narrator), her older brother Jem, and their father Atticus. In the novel, a black man named Tom Robinson is accused of raping a white woman. From the start, emotions in the town explode. Atticus Finch is an attorney and is assigned to represent Tom Robinson. And he does so even in the face of violent, racist opposition. Although Atticus proves that Tom Robinson is innocent of the charges, the jury still convicts him. Atticus vows to appeal the verdict as Tom is taken away. A short time later, Tom attempts an escape from prison and is shot and killed by the guards.

For me, Atticus Finch has always been a hero. He stands strong and does what is right in the face of rabid opposition. He is a man of good character. Today, it is not at all difficult to find an attorney who will confess that they were inspired to study law because of Atticus Finch. He represents what is noble of their profession.

Recently, I was listening to an interview with an African American writer. This writer explained that she truly loved the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, she wanted to challenge its readers to reconsider the heroic nature of Atticus Finch. Was he a good man? Yes. A hero? Maybe not. Atticus Finch, she said, was not racist. That is clear in the book. He strives to protect his children from racist influences.

Nonetheless, this writer argues, Atticus Finch was not anti-racist. Every action he takes is framed within the system—within the social system, within the legal system. He only takes the Robinson case when it is assigned to him by the judge. He does an excellent job of defending Robinson. He even protects Robinson from a lynch mob. But Atticus only operates within the system. He does nothing to attempt to actually change the system.

The character Atticus Finch does not meet the definition of anti-racism by identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism around him. He is a good man, but he is not a hero. The novel concludes with the young girl Scout reflecting on how their lives resumed their normal course after that turbulent summer. Nothing changed.

Today, we continue our excursion through the oracles of the prophet Amos. In the 7th century BC, Amos was a farmer and a shepherd and was called by God from his home in Judah to take God’s message to the people of Israel. He travels north to Samaria the capital of Israel and indicts the wealthy and powerful of the nation for their sinful actions and their rejection of God. He decries the way they have perverted justice and abused the poor to their profit. The refrain throughout this

book is a continuing warning of God's judgment—that God will bring ruin on these people if they do not change their ways.

In today's reading from chapter 6, we again hear of God's impending judgment of when these people shall be put into exile and their cities destroyed.

Each Monday, I meet with a group of pastors and we discuss the passages that we intend to preach on the coming Sunday. This week, after I presented this section of Amos, the others looked at me and asked if I was angry with my congregation. What had my church done to deserve a reading like this? I laughed because I had wondered the same thing. What people deserve the continuing onslaught of God's judgment that we find here in Amos? It is relentless and contains no obvious offering of hope. As Christians, we are accustomed to finding a bit of grace mixed in with our judgment. God threatens to punish but God also promises to forgive. But not in Amos. In Amos, it is 'all smite all the time.'

In chapter 6, Amos focuses on the idle rich. By idle, I mean that literally. They lie on their beds and lounge on their couches. They enjoy the finest meat. And as they dine, musicians perform. They drink wine and wash themselves with exquisite oils. These people are the *notable* of the land, the upper class. And yet, they spend their time lounging about, gorging on fine foods and exhibiting no concern whatsoever for the overall well-being of the people of their land. These people are complacent and oblivious. Their very lives are a rejection of God. They are like the rich man in the parable told by Jesus. This rich man lived a life of luxury while at his gate there was a beggar named Lazarus starving and covered in sores. Lazarus yearned simply to eat of the crumbs that fell from the table of the rich man. Amos accuses the wealthy of turning justice into a poison. They have turned the sweet taste of righteousness into bitterness. And God is angry. And God swears judgment on these people.

God's anger does not mean that God hates these people. God is angry because God loves. And because God is love, when an individual or a group causes others to suffer, then God is grieved. God's judgment is not simply punishment; its purpose is to motivate people to change. God doesn't delight in anger; God delights in being merciful and forgiving. God delights when justice rolls across the land like a might river.

As we experience the words of Amos, it is difficult to place ourselves in the story. Who are we? Are we the affluent living in our fine mansions indifferent to the plight of the poor and oppressed? Or do we see ourselves completely outside the bounds of this story and innocent of the sins that Amos describes?

We are probably somewhere in the middle—not sinless but not as sinful as those that Amos rails against. But even in the middle, does God have cause to be angry with us for being idle?

As a church, we do many good and kind acts—we provide food and shelter to those in need. We strive to be people of good character, even God-character. But is that enough? Baskets of food are only band-aids for hunger. A bed for the night won't eradicate homelessness. Should we be stepping out of our comfort zones and addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty and gender inequality and racism and the many other expressions of injustice in our world? Should we step outside the system?

This summer, protestors have been flooding America's streets calling for change. Their actions make many of us uncomfortable. Sometimes it is a challenge to empathize with their passion. However, I have chosen to view these protestors not as pests but as prophets. Like Amos, it is their job to make us uncomfortable, to shine a light on injustice and suffering, to identify injustice, challenge the system, and bring about change. Their voices may make us squirm, but the sound is music to God's ears.

I have spoken about the lack of a message of hope in the book of Amos. That is not entirely correct. At the end of this book, we will discover an oracle of hope. But the book itself is a statement of hope. It is an appeal to a lost people to return to their God. God sent the prophet Amos with a message not of doom but of salvation. The people only need to listen. God sent the prophet and many more and even his son because God is love. The very presence of the prophet is an assurance of hope, a reminder of God's love.

May we hear this message of hope. May we respond and shatter the cycles of injustice. May we not be idle.