

Proper 10, Year B
Amos 7:7-15
Mark 6: 14-29

Trinity Episcopal Church
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A Matter of Choice:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

There's a scene I can't get out of my mind. It's a scene from an operetta I saw as a child. Perhaps you know the operetta or maybe the story behind it—Uncle Tom's Cabin. The scene that haunts me is one of Eliza, a slave girl, attempting to reach safety on the other side of a frozen river. Voices yell at her from each side of the river—"Run, Eliza, run," cry the voices of freedom, the voices of life. "Come back, the ice will crack, you'll fall in and die," cry the voices of slavery, the voices of death. Eliza turns first one way and then the other. She's uncertain where to go. She's uncertain which voice to follow. I can't remember now which voice she follows in the end. I hope she chose the voice of freedom, but I'm not sure. I just remember the bombarding voices that pulled her in two very different ways and the tension of the moment.

I wonder if King Herod found himself in a similar spot. I wonder if he felt pulled in very different directions. Remember the voices pulling at him—his wife Herodias clamoring for the head of John the Baptist; his guests expecting quite a show and calling for follow-through when Herod promises the dancing girl anything she wants; that dancing girl demanding not only that the baptizer be beheaded, but also that his head be served on a platter; and John the Baptist inviting Herod to repent, to change his ways, to return to God, to turn to life. No wonder Herod was perplexed. Powerful voices were pulling at him.

I think it's that way for us as well—powerful voices pulling at us most all of the time. Voices in the present and voices from the past. Voices from our culture and voices from deep inside our heads. Think of the voices you've heard or heard about this week. Think of the many voices that pull at us. The pull of voices that divide, voices that polarize, voices that call us to conform no matter what the price, voices that hurt deeply—voices of death. Or voices that connect, voices that heal, voices that cry out for justice, voices that bring out the better angels of our nature—voices of life.

Just this week I've heard stories of folks who struggle with that inner voice—a voice that says, "You're not worthy" while another voice contends "You're a beautiful child of God." In the last seven days, I've seen folks struggle between their own sense of self-worth and the demeaning messages our culture often sends. I've heard folks' heartache as they sort out the mixed messages they receive—messages that bless and messages that condemn; messages that build folks up and messages that pull folks down.

Just this week I read about a country club that yielded to the voice of privilege over the call of justice. Perhaps you read the story too. It was in the Press Democrat—an article about a country club in suburban Philadelphia. An inner-city day camp had contracted to use their pool. When club members saw the African-American day campers swimming

in the pool, they pulled their children out of the pool. One parent was overheard saying, “she would see to it that the group...did not return.”¹ Imagine that—in 2009! How powerful those messages that demean can be.

Just this week, I’ve found myself, on more than one occasion, pulled by two very different voices—one that called for justice and one that insisted on comfort and convenience; one that necessitated rocking the boat and one, deep in my head—my mother’s voice—insisting, “Don’t make waves.” There’s tension in that moment of choice that often makes it hard to figure out what voice to follow.

And yet it matters very much what voice we choose to follow. It’s a matter of life and death. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples—“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”²

John and Herod and the prophet Amos and you and I as well all face such a choice. The challenge is often how we make that choice.

Through the voice of the prophet Amos, God says, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel...”

The plumb line we choose to determine the voice we follow matters. Will we follow the plumb line of convenience, the plumb line of least resistance, the plumb line of comfort, the plumb line of convenience—the plumb line of death? Or will we follow God’s plumb line—the plumb line of justice, the plumb line of righteousness, the plumb line of love—the plumb line of life? The line we choose makes all the difference in the world.

These moments of choice are not a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing. They happen every day, all of the time, in the words we use, the stories we tell, the wounds we nurse, and in the hurts we forgive. The question is always the same—“Whose voice will you follow?” “What plumb line will you use?”

¹Ron Todt, “Discrimination Alleged at Pool,” Santa Rosa Press Democrat.

²Mark 8: 34-35.