

**Sermon “Tough Truths”**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday July 13, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Last week during our service I talked about an experiment that highlighted the fact that even when seminary students were asked to teach about the parable of the good Samaritan and then sent to a different building to speak they were found to step over a person who was directly in their path and suffering—instead of stopping to help them. That raised the issue of how sometimes when experiences do not touch directly on our lived experience that it can be easy to step over the suffering of others. It is often not until we are shaken out of complacency that we are able to see things more clearly. Prophets like Amos were called to bring attention to the moral and spiritual condition of a nation and remind people that there are consequences when we cause the suffering of others or turn a blind eye to it.

While the Presbyterian church is far from perfect, we have worked to grapple with difficult subjects throughout our history. Issues like equality and reconciliation among others have been important parts of our work and have also led to us writing and sharing confessions when we have been wrong. We have also worked to engage our youth in some of these discussions at a national level. Nine years ago, during the Canada Youth conference (now rebranded as Uplift) one of the major topics was around refugees. Each year Canada Youth focuses on a specific current topic or issue that we are facing in the world. So together everyone present at CY in 2016 participated in a daylong refugee simulation based on a UN model. It was an eye-opening event.

During the experience Chad and I were called clan leaders, and we helped shepherd our group from station to station so, we observed more than we took part. Our role would be similar to humanitarian or religious groups who try to help refugees along the road but, in many ways are also limited in how much they can do. The day began with a rationed breakfast that went

over about as well as a lead balloon. It was also damp and misty, so people were uncomfortable, hungry, and anxious. Then people were divided into family groups, and each family was given a profile of who they were, what their jobs were etc. and then everyone was blind folded and the story of what happened was read to them.

In effect their town had been bombed, and they were now on the run for safety. At this point in time the groups were still blind folded, and people came in and started separating the families out across a field. People were supposed to try and find their complete family group without any help and without taking off their blindfold. Once they were finally brought together injuries were handed out to different people in the family groups that they would then have to mimic for the rest of the simulation. There were injured legs, blinded people, and a number of other conditions that had to be taken into consideration.

For the next part in the simulation people were crowded into concrete bunkers and then left to sit. They had no information, no idea how long they would be there, and there were different rules they had to follow such as no leaning on the wall etc. By this point they were getting frustrated and irritable. Finally, they were told they would be reaching a border. When they arrived, they had to designate a family person to speak to the border agents and get their paperwork in order. They had to plead their case to the agents and then try to complete their paperwork which was often in an indecipherable language. That is when things started to fall apart. People were being turned away, or told their paperwork was not in order. I watched one family group crowd around the "father" who was given paperwork to fill out in a language they did not understand. They started to ask him questions like "Did you ask what this means? How do we fill it out? You need to go back to talk to them again." I watched another family group as their two sons were accepted and the rest were turned away, and you could see the two who

were playing the sons turn to one another unsure of what to do. What started as an exercise became heart breaking—how much more so for those facing this reality on a daily basis.

Nine years have passed but we continue to hear about refugees on an almost daily basis. In fact, if anything the situation has become more dire with war in Ukraine, between Israel and Palestine, and the restrictions on women in Afghanistan just to name a few. We hear of people fleeing dangerous situations trying to find a place of safety for their family. I know the statistics, and I try to keep on top of what is happening. At the same time, you can become desensitized over time. Watching our youth experience this simply as a day event—and their anxiety and fear just at the thought of it struck home. Our group that day also included a lot of the international guests. While we debriefed the event with them stories began to emerge. Some lived in villages overwhelmed by refugees and were navigating the difficulties they were facing. Some had cousins who worked in the refugee centres, or, on the borders. One had a friend who died trying to flee. One told a story about a father and son who each believed the other had perished in an attack, and ten years later when the son returned to his village (after fleeing overseas) he found his father still living. It is difficult to find the words to express the heartbreak and impossibility families are facing. As Christians and as a faith community we try to find ways to help, and to use our voices on behalf of those that need one—and if there are moments when we refuse, we pray that God would give us a good shake.

During the time of Amos, he was the one doing the shaking. Much like our own day and age rulers and leaders were not immune to corruption. Amaziah was the priest in Bethel but, he managed to ingratiate himself with the Royal court. “There is a long history of the so-called court preacher, who has the ability to speak pleasing words to powerful people, soothing their consciences and telling them what they want to hear. This cozy arrangement between a religious professional and powerful politicians might have gone on forever, had it not been for the intrusive word of God.” The cozy set up Amaziah arranged will end, and difficult truths are

going to be shared. There is no room for the exploitation of people in God's kingdom. We know that God stands for the powerless, the meek, and those facing injustice and we are called to that work as well.

Which raises another interesting point. A biblical judge not only makes judgements but also actively works to set things right. While Amaziah and Jeroboam likely did not appreciate the shake up, judgement, at least in a biblical context can also be positive if we allow ourselves to see it. "God comes to us, sometimes through the words of a prophet like Amos, loving us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves." In many ways I think it would be a far scarier prospect to live in a world where God did not call us to be our best and help us find our way back to where we need to be. It would be terrifying, if we ever found ourselves left to our own devices, not caring about how our actions affect others, and only having people speak the words we want to hear—and not the words we need to hear. My children would love to live only on a diet of screen time and candy but, I have to speak truth to them on a near daily basis—it would not be good for their bodies or their minds.

Sometimes it feels impossible to live in a world with this much suffering. To know what to do, or how best to respond, and we are all too aware of how limited our resources can be. Quite frankly it is overwhelming. However, there is a song it is worth going back to in those moments, when we say, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." We are not alone, in fact there are people the world over who are also letting their lights shine, and together we stand shoulder to shoulder working to make a difference. Sometimes we might be called to be like Amos and speak truth to difficult circumstances, sometimes we will need to hear that truth spoken in our own lives and be stirred to action. Together, hopefully we make this world a better place, a kinder place, and also where all find welcome.