Over the last few years, as the world has gone from unprecedented event to the next, one thing has become exceedingly necessary to have: a comfort TV show—a show that you can turn on, not necessarily have to pay attention to, and snuggle under the blankets, letting the world fall away for a few minutes. You really saw this become a thing during the pandemic—people watching the same shows over and over because they were filled with warmth, joy, and most importantly, a lack of stress. For me, I function with a solid rotation of two shows in particular, ones that I know will be a balm to any kind of bad day—be it global or personal, they will fill my heart and make me laugh, they will help remind me that there is good in the world. On the days when I need comfort, you can find my TV tuned into either *The Golden Girls* or *The Great British Baking Show.*

Lately, *Bake Off* has been my saving grace in the midst of a lot of personal anxiety and stress. I am able to turn it on and melt into a world of sticky puds, biscuits, Chelsea buns, and more cups of tea than you can count. Unlike American cooking shows that thrive off of ridiculous scenarios and cutting competition, *Bake Off* is pure heartwarming. The contestants help each other, the hosts are warm and ridiculous, there aren't thousands of dollars at stake, it's just a bunch of people who become like family, baking together in a big, white tent, and it is joyful. However, at the end of the day,

it is a cooking show and so there is judging and critique—it isn't necessarily biting and tear you down critique, but it's still there, because there has to be some barometer for success.

When Mary Berry was the co-judge, the big no no was a "soggy bottom;" you did not want your pie or tart or pastry to have seeped into the bottom crust and left it soggy. For Paul Hollywood, the one constant judge throughout the run of the show, he's the bread guy, under bake or over prove something and he will know just by looking at the texture of bread. However, there is one critique that has been constant across judges, and one that contestants have come to dread because they know it strikes at the heart of what the goal of *Bake Off* is, to produce good bakes. If you come away from judging having received the note of "style over substance," you know things have gone drastically wrong.

Without a doubt, the judges are looking for elegant, beautiful, well put together bakes. We eat with our eyes first after all, however, sometimes contestants go too all in on décor and leave themselves with a lackluster product. Something can look immaculate, like it belongs in a patisserie window, but if it tastes bland or not good? Well then, it's a bit of a waste. Just because something looks good, doesn't mean it tastes good, and when you have Paul Hollywood telling you that you've gone for style over

substance, you know that you have had a very bad day in the tent. And honestly? When you have a prophet like Amos telling you kind of the same thing? You know that your faith journey has gone a little off the rails.

None of the prophets are particularly touchy feely, but Amos takes the cake a bit when it comes to not pulling his punches. He says what he means and he isn't really interested in guarding the feelings of his audience. He wants people to hear God's word and to come back together as a community. At the time that Amos is operating, God's people are split into two kingdoms, the northern and the southern, and they are *not* getting along. Amos is trying to bridge the divide between the kingdoms, encouraging them to come back together not only with each other, but particularly with God. Their entire faith life has gotten out of whack and that, more than anything, is what has caused this rift between the two areas.

The people in the South have looked at the people in the North and seen nothing but rampant issues of economic inequality. They see the mistreatment of the poor and the disenfranchisement of far too many. They have accused the northerners of abandoning their shared core values as God's children, namely that they are all *equal* as children of God, and thus they should be treating each other as such, as opposed to driving wedges between each other based on economics and other differences. (Whenever I

read the prophets, it also comes with a stark reminder that as much as the world has changed, our fundamental identities as human being has not. Here we have people arguing amongst each other because of economic division as opposed to uniting around their shared belovedness, anyway…)

The thing that drives Amos absolutely *bananas* is the fact that in the midst of all of this conflict and injustice, the people are still claiming they are doing their religious duty because they're going to worship. When they're called out, they immediately point to their rituals, their sacrifices, their offerings, all of the things that they have done in worship of God. They say that's all that matters. How can they not be in good standing with their faith when they're out here worshipping properly—singing the right songs, offering the right things, what exactly are they getting wrong? And Amos' answer is basically…everything.

Amos just flat out tells them that their worship means precisely *nothing* if it is not coupled with action towards God's children, towards their siblings. All of their worship is just baseless noise and fruitless items left upon an altar if they immediately leave worship and continue in their ways of injustice and inequality. They cannot proclaim that they are right with God when their actions are nowhere close to righteousness. And here we get one of the most well-known, oft-quoted passages of scripture. Stop

worrying about worship and instead, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Justice and righteousness, equality and genuine care of neighbor should be *constants* in their lives, they should be the things which keep their lives moving forward, never stopping. When they look at the world around them they should see life amongst their neighbors and how they can make it better for them, not how they can get ahead by climbing over their neighbors, taking advantage of them, and keeping them downtrodden and poor. God's children don't exist on a ladder of who is better, but on an equal plain before the throne.

And well…I do not think we want to hear this. I mean, we've *heard* it plenty, usually this passage gets tossed around a lot around MLK Day in easy to repost memes that we don't actually pay attention to, so sure we've *heard* it, but we don't want to *hear* it, because to hear it would be to pay attention to it, turn our gaze inward and ask ourselves, truthfully, how we need to re-evaluate our relationship with God, our faith, and especially with our neighbors. To take this passage seriously, is to take seriously the idea that our actions towards others are more important than our actions towards God, because how we treat our neighbors *is* how we treat God. To take this passage seriously, is to take seriously the fact that what we do here this morning in worship is *the least important* thing we will do all week, but

rather what we do when we leave this place, when the worship has ended and the service has begun, is the key to where our faith lies.

When we come here and confess that we have put our own piety over care for God's beloved and then leave here and continue to point to the fact that we *went to church* while maintaining our restrictive ideas when it comes to economic rights, diversity, and health care, our confession has become meaningless. Empty words said because they are on the page, not because we actually intend to try harder, love better, see our neighbors as human.

When we come here and pray forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us, and then leave this here and check our texts and see the message from the family member we're in conflict with and rattle off all the reasons why they're still on the outs. When we can already feel our guts roiling with angst about work tomorrow and the co-worker we have to face, our prayer has become meaningless. Empty words, because we have no intention of forgiving the smallest of slightest, despite the forgiveness of sin that we have received here.

When we come here and say "Thanks be to God," at the end of a reading like this from Amos, but then go out and continue to support legislation and politics that are geared towards injustice, born out of fear and prejudice of God's beloved, wonderfully and fearfully made children, then

our responses have become meaningless. Empty words, because we aren't thankful for this reminder, we're just doing and saying what we're supposed to, rote responses to a word that have no intention of living out.

This morning, worship *means something* if we leave here and actually live out, or at least *try* to live out the things we have heard, the things we have prayed, the things we have pondered. It doesn't mean we have to get it all right immediately, be perfect at it from the jump, but it does mean we have to try, to honestly and sincerely examine our hearts for how we can live out our faith in real, practical ways that are more than just lip service to our God who perpetually pours love, forgiveness, and grace into our hearts. The world is yearning for those same gifts. Our neighbors are pleading for love, for grace, for us to see them as entire beings, not just our quick, one off impressions. The words of the prophet beg us to have a faith that puts substance over style, that says, it might not look perfect, it might not look pretty, but it is genuine and it is who I have been created to be. The world and our neighbors need our effort, our hearts, our willingness to put into practice what we do here. Do not let our worship become a clanging cymbal that does nothing, but let it be the first drop of water that leads to an ever-flowing river so that for once substance may reign, and justice might roll on forever, righteousness never ceasing it's path through God's world. **AMEN!**