

The Bible Speaks

by Jeffrey E. Frantz

*Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs
to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music;
who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6)*

A time to be grieved. In the context of our community, our nation, our world, is there ever such a time—a time to be *grieved*? Is there a time when current conditions, present-day injustices, evoke such stirring feelings of sadness and sorrow from within that we are, literally, *grieved* by it all?

To be *grieved* is to be overcome with sadness, sorrow and distress; it is to be mournful.

All of this is to ask the probing question: aren't there things about which we *ought* to be grieved? Aren't there injustices and sordid events in our communities and in the wider world that *ought* to upset us? Aren't there grievances and violations of the public trust that *ought* to evoke in us a note of thundering protest?

This is the rhetorical pronouncement—indeed, the indictment—of the prophet Amos in the above reading.

Amos' prophetic activity (in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, capital at Samaria) was during the historical period known as the *Silver Age* (around 746 BCE, *Before the Common Era*), comparable only to the *Golden Age* of King David and Solomon. Although Israel was always a vassal state to the dominant regional power (Assyria at the time), nonetheless, this was a period of great economic prosperity and material wealth.

It was a time also when the affluence of the *elites* brought with it life-styles of luxury and extravagance, resulting in abuse and exploitation of the poor and the lower classes.

This is the context for Amos' stinging words of condemnation to Israel. The consequences of Israel's sinful ways would, of course, be eventual defeat (the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722, BCE) and exile.

Clearly, for Israel, there was indeed *a time to be grieved*. There was a time to be upset and deeply troubled by prevailing trends and behaviors, particularly in relation to the poor and the needy.

And what about us, today? Certainly the unfolding situation of the *Jena Six* in Jena, Louisiana, comes to mind. The case is race-related and is, therefore, complex and multi-layered.

The first layer, which took place on September of 2006, involved a regrettably racist reaction of some white students at a local high school when a black student decided to *sit* in an area (under a particular tree on the school grounds) where black students were apparently not welcome. Although the black student had gotten permission to sit there, the next day three *hangman's nooses* were reportedly hanging from the tree.

Regrettably, this abhorrent, racially-charged action *only* resulted in the guilty white students being temporarily suspended from school (their expulsion was over-ruled by the local school board).

Layer two, in December of 2006, resulted in a school-related fight where some black students beat up some white students and were later arrested and charged with attempted second degree murder. The six black students became known as the *Jena Six*.

Although the charges have been reduced, still, they seem egregiously out of balance with what reportedly took place. And thus, layer three: the public outcry in support of the *Jena Six*.

While the outcome of the case is still pending, with all the national and international attention attracted to the case, prospects for a fair outcome are more encouraging. Still, the event serves as a reminder that, although we've made enormous strides towards racial equality in America, we have yet a long way to go.

Certainly the details of the case matter, but of even more concern is that prejudice and feelings of racism still percolate *beneath* and *not-so-beneath* the surface.

As a people for whom race relations have always challenged us in the deepest recesses of our national soul, we cannot but grieve over these events. The path to racial justice continues to be an up-hill path inviting tolerance, enlightenment and human decency.

The point of all this is that there are things about which we *ought* to be grieved, about which we *ought* to be upset and troubled. The war in Iraq, too, comes to mind, along with its own sordid tale of deception and untruth and the unpopular cast it has set on the face of America throughout the world.

Having the capacity to grieve in the face of injustice, or in the grip of arrogant hubris of *nation-as-empire*, is a good thing. It draws us into the realm of the One God who longs for the day when we will all join hands together, on *all God's holy mountain* (Isaiah 11:9)—one, covenantal community, forever and ever.

