

Some family business (Amos 6:1a, 4-7)

Amos has some concerns.

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As a sociologist-cum-theologian, I take seriously the opportunity to understand the thinking of groups, deploying whatever statistical method is most suitable to analyzing the critical questions of our life, times, and social strata.

One of the most pressing questions on the south side of Chicago, where I live, is this: *What is wrong with Kanye West?*

I don't like the framing of this question, for a lot of reasons. But it is my job as your tour guide to give you the facts without coloring them.

People seem to mean the question in one of two ways. The first is to ask simply, *What's going on with somebody who I love and admire but is now acting erratically?* The answer there has been provided by Kanye himself: he is living with mental illness and working his way to health. (As is the case with all of us, this project is proceeding at full speed, with mixed results.) We should take his vulnerability as an opportunity to have frank discussions about mental illness, and these discussions should move us toward loving action with those most affected.

Easy, right?

The second version of "What's wrong?" is the way people began asking the question after hearing Kanye's outbursts at various concerts, where he was revealing not only his own personal business but also that of his friends. Most people sympathize with

his illness fully—but have no tolerance for his airing of other people’s dirty laundry. (It’s also ironic that he has an actual song called “Family Business.”) *That’s the problem I have*, is what I can faithfully report back from most city blocks, although I’m not sure you can separate the illness from what the illness creates. I’m not an expert; I just love the guy and want him to be whole.

“Family business” is exactly what Amos 6 is all about. There are moments in the life of a family or community when one person simply needs to talk to another person, nobody else needs to know, and then everybody can move on. And there are other times—times we dread—when it is clear that we *all* need to talk, because what is happening, even if it’s in one sense between a couple of people, involves all of us.

So when you read “Zion” (the southern kingdom) and “Samaria” (the northern kingdom), know that Amos is gathering the entire family together to discuss some serious business. What is such a business, so serious that the North and South must be addressed together? “The ruin of Joseph,” aka the poor people struggling in both kingdoms. To paraphrase Amos in terms you may have heard in your own family: *You out here relaxing and proclaiming the goodness of God, but you refuse to take care of your own people.*

It’s a big problem. And Amos sets it up using language—“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory...”—that we should read as either careful massaging of his readers or world-class sarcasm. Knowing Amos, I’d guess the latter. I wonder if Amos’s tone influenced the opening words of “[Letter From Birmingham Jail](#)” (“My dear fellow clergymen”), given that in that moment Martin Luther King considered these men neither *his people* nor *dear* nor *fellows* nor *clergy* of any moral integrity. Just a thought.

The plight of the poor in Amos’s day is not a matter of foreign policy; it is the business of the comfortable rulers to address it! Or short of addressing it, to even *grieve* the ruination of their own people! They are condemned not only for their lack of action but also for their emotional distance from the problem. These folks have found a way to isolate themselves in every way imaginable.

I’ll let you make the contextual translations. Suffice it to say, Amos 6 speaks to families, nations, and individuals across space and time, and the prophet spends most of his time asking a simple and familiar question: *What is wrong with y’all?*

In the same vein, he responds to his critics with Kanye-esque bravura: *We need to discuss this out in the open, because it affects all of us.* When it comes to poverty, Amos is certainly right.