



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **It's the Little Things**

Amos 8:1-12

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This passage from Amos is really apocalyptic stuff. It is imagery of the world turned upside down. The brightness of the sun turning into inky night, waters rising and the earth falling. It is imagery of the world turned upside down. And all of it because an ephah was small. So if the prophet says that the apocalypse will surely come unless the ephah is the right size, kind of makes you want to double check your ephah is the right size and, for starters, probably makes you want to double what an ephah is. I'll say more about this in a bit, but an ephah is a unit of measurement, a very ordinary unit that everyone would have been familiar with, like a gallon. Why is the prophet Amos so interested in units of measurement?

And it's not just the prophet Amos, either. In the Gospel of Luke, in the sermon on the plain, Jesus plays off of this very prophecy from Amos. In the great ethical treatise of the Gospel of Luke, as the evangelist is trying to capture the essence of how Christians ought to live their lives, Jesus says "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure will be put into your lap, pressed down, shaken together, running over, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." There it is again, units of measurement, this time being used to describe the foundation of morality.

So, here we go, as promised: the very reason why I'm sure many of you have come here today, for a lesson on ancient weights and measures. For starters, an ephah is a unit of volume. It was literally a bucket, and it was used to measure household necessities like flour for making daily bread. An ephah is not a very large amount. It's an everyday kind of measure, not that far off from a gallon. And the way it would work to buy an ephah of flour is like this. I would go to the market, and a merchant would have big bins of flour, with a bucket—an ephah—sitting on top. I would go and ask for an ephah of flour, and the merchant would scoop it up in the bucket, level it off to the top, and that's what I'm paying for.

But, what if a merchant wanted to get a little bit extra, for themselves? One way to do it would be to shave down the top of the ephah, the bucket, just a little bit, maybe 2% or 3%. Just enough so that the ephah is a little small but not so you could notice it with the naked eye. Or maybe, you could

pour some wax into the bottom of the bucket and then paint the wax brown, so that it looks large from the outside, but has a deceptively thick base. Just a little bit here and there. But the merchant makes the ephah small but still charges full price. And how would you ever tell?

People knew that merchants were up to this sort of thing, making the ephah small: that's why the prophet Amos is railing against it! Even the honest merchants would be under suspicion and so the actions of a few would destroy people's trust in one another. Making the ephah small, destroying trust, this was a practice that set everyone against their neighbors. It allowed the rich to prey upon the poor, it allowed those with plenty to prey upon those with less. And if left unchallenged it would sour the common life. It unraveled the common bonds that held people together as a society, with the worst pains set aside for those who would suffer the most. It was a little thing, but it threatened to turn things upside down.

The prophet Amos said it was like the brightness of the sun turning into inky night, waters rising and the earth falling. A fraudulent system of weights and measures, making an ephah small, destroying trust. Who could trust strangers in those days? It's a little thing, but little things have a way of turning into so much more.

What's to be done?

Well, look again to what Jesus says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure will be put into your lap, pressed down, shaken together, running over, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Imagine that, going to a flour merchant who scoops up with their ephah that might be a little short, you never know, but instead of leveling it off, presses it down to make more room, fills it up again, shakes it like a bucket of popcorn at the movies to make a bit more room, then fills it up so much that it's heaping over the top and overflowing. That good and generous measure would do so much to restore trust. It's a little thing, a bit of flour valued at no more than pocket change.

But little things have a way of turning into so much more. Here we are, in times like the prophet Amos was talking about. Amos warned against a coming apocalypse, that the world might turn upside down. And we have gone through that—are going through it now. The world has been turned upside down and right side up again, and then upside down again, and I'm not sure which way is up any more. But all of the things that Amos warned about have indeed occurred.

We've seen neighbors set against neighbors. We've seen the rich prey upon the poor, we've seen those with plenty prey upon those with less. We have seen unraveled the common bonds that hold people together as a society with the worst pains set aside for those who would suffer the most. It is little things—a strip of cloth, a pinprick in the arm, a fraction of an inch off the top of an ephah. They're little things, but little things have a way of turning into so much more.

What is the solution? How on earth can we come back from this as a society?

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It is a hard thing, a daunting idea to build back up trust again after so much has happened. The end of that? How the world would look were all of this to be repaired? I don't know what that is. But the beginning of such a wonder is clear. It is generosity of spirit. And we have to practice at that. It is a discipline that must be worked at.

We practice it here in all sorts of ways—in praying for one another, in offering one another grace when we fail or hurt one another. And the most foundational way to practice is by giving. Giving is not an inconvenience that we as a spiritual community kind of put up with out of necessity. Giving is a spiritual discipline.

As a pastor, if I was given the choice between a huge pile of money and the chance to run a church stewardship campaign, I would choose the stewardship campaign every time. Because the act of giving generously is a spiritual discipline. To give generously—whatever the dollar amount looks like is really not relevant so long as it is generous for the giver--this is a Christian discipline. Generosity can take want and turn it into plenty, generosity can take anger and turn it into peace, generosity can take hunger and turn it into a feast, generosity can take loneliness and turn it into community, generosity can take sorrow and turn it into laughter. Generosity is a marvel, it is a miracle. It starts with a little thing. But little things have a way of turning into so much more. Thanks be to God.