

Sermon "Who Is My Neighbor?"

Scripture Readings: Amos 7:7-13, Luke 10:25-37

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Our first scripture reading is from the prophet Amos (7:7-13), one of the strongest voices for social justice in the Old Testament. Amos employs the metaphor of a plumb line, an ancient device (still in use today) which guides the vertical construction of a wall with the line of a lead weight hanging on a string. Amos' vision of the plumb line is an oracle of judgment against the Northern Kingdom. In the same way that a plumb line reveals the imperfections and structural weaknesses of a wall, so Israel's injustices reveal a lack of integrity in the nation. The real tragedy is that the priest Amaziah, a religious advisor to the King, is the structural weakness in this story. He cannot hear the truth because of his personal biases and prejudices against Amos who came from the Southern Kingdom. This is the Word of God.

7 This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in God's hand. 8 And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; 9 the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword." 10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. 11 For thus Amos has said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." 12 And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; 13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Our second scripture reading, Luke 10:25-37, is a familiar interaction between Jesus and a lawyer who seeks to measure the structural soundness of his righteousness through his understanding and keeping of the law. The law continues to serve as the plumb line for Israel's religious leaders. Jesus reveals that the wall they are measuring has sadly, unintentionally become a barrier rather than a means to their end. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The title of the sermon: “Who Is My Neighbor?”

The Text: “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Luke 10:29

Let us pray. Holy God, as we reflect on the meaning of these words, teach us the boundlessness of your love in this time and place and give us the wisdom to break through those barriers which separate us from one another. Amen.

Who is my neighbor? Sounds like a reasonable question... especially from a lawyer who has spent his life studying and applying the law of God. It is a plumb line question! If my inheriting eternal life is dependent upon how I love my neighbor—*who is my neighbor?* Give me a plumb line with which I can measure my integrity in keeping the law of love.

According to Joachim Jeremais, a biblical scholar, the answer to this question was in dispute for first century Jews. He writes in *The Parables of Jesus*: “It was generally agreed that the term connoted fellow-country men, including full proselytes (converted Gentiles), but there was disagreement about the exceptions...; and a widespread popular saying expected personal enemies. (You have heard that God said; You shall love your fellow countryman; but you need not love your enemy.) Hence Jesus was not being asked for a definition of the term ‘friend’, but for an indication as to where, within the community, the limits of the duty of loving were to be drawn. How far does my responsibility extend? That is the meaning of the question.”

Jesus responds to this reasonable question with an unreasonable reply. Sadly, over the years this story has become remarkably reasonable. The Good Samaritan has been reduced to triple A in the twenty-first century. In the 1960’s, the Good Samaritan laws were passed protecting medical personnel from liability in cases of emergency care given freely on the road. There is some irony that our modern understanding of the parable has been reduced to a dispute over liability, trivializing Jesus’ words to this lawyer. For most of us the “Good Samaritan” is a positive association and to be called one is considered a compliment. This is an indication that we do not understand what Christ was saying to the first century Jew. Inadvertently, in the retelling over the years we have robbed and stripped this parable of its true meaning.

What was it that Christ was communicating? Initially it appears that Jesus is connecting with the logic, the reasonableness of this man’s thinking. Surely the priest would not be condemned in first century Judaism for not stopping to help this man. He was, in fact, acting within the Levitical law which forbade a priest to defile himself with “a dead man by the way.” If the victim was alive and not a Jew, the priest had no responsibility to him according to the law and was acting within the plumb line of justice.

The Levite’s behavior may have been a bit more questionable, but nonetheless, possible. The Priest and Levite were the two highest levels in the religious community. Those who listened to the story with the lawyer anticipated the third character might be an Israelite layman — giving the story an anti-clergy twist. A reasonable response to the question that sometimes we get caught up in the rules and regulations of religion to the point where we forget our responsibility to love our neighbor, allowing people to fall through the cracks.

However, Jesus chose to go beyond this man’s world of logic ... to the bottom line. Jesus chose to break through the façade that religious people build to give a false sense of goodness. Jesus

brought a Samaritan into the picture and in so doing stripped the lawyer of his pious defenses, exposing his lack of comprehension regarding God and life and the absolutely unreasonable and unlimited nature of the duty to love.

The hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans had always been strong. The Jews never forgave the Samaritans for intermarrying during the Assyrian exile (an exile foretold by the prophet Amos) and viewed them as impure and racially inferior. To say there was irreconcilable hostility was an understatement. They exemplified passionate racial hatred.

When I traveled the 17-mile winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho as a part of a Middle East tour in 1985, our guide, a Jewish woman, articulated this hostility for us. “The Jew who was victimized by the robbers,” she said, “would have preferred to be dead than give honor to this Samaritan. Within Jewish law, this man would have been honor bound to accept the Samaritan into his family and enter into a reciprocal, mutual relationship. And so death – the end of life – seemed more tolerable than the thought of honoring a life, which is hated.”

When Jesus asks “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer can’t even say “the Samaritan” but replies knowingly, “the one who showed mercy.” The plumb line is brought to a new standard.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, whom we will host at Westminster this August, reflects on this parable in an issue of the *Biblical Archaeology Review*: “*The parable offers ... a vision of life rather than death... It insists that enemies can prove to be neighbors, that compassion has no boundaries, and that judging people on the basis of their religion or ethnicity will leave us dying in a ditch.*”

And so when we ask today in a world still crooked with racism, “Who is our neighbor?” When we seek from our God a pat on the back for how well we are doing at religion and politics, Jesus refuses to patronize us with a contrived plumb line. Instead he embraces us with the truth, the profound reality of our own limited loving as human beings and the absolutely unreasonable and unlimited duty of God’s love.

However Jesus did more than talk about the duty of love. He loved us absolutely, illogically and completely! When he embraced the cross... Jesus became the neighbor who showed us mercy by healing our wounded lives and offering us rest in God’s arms. When Jesus embraced the cross he became the Samaritan, the scapegoat of our religion and politics. When Jesus embraced the cross, he loved us with all his heart, soul, strength, mind and life to break down the walls of hatred within our small, parochial lives.

The rest is up to us. “Who is our neighbor, and whose neighbor will we be?” Amen.