

Meditation “A Plumb Line Question”

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

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Amos 7:7-10, is 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 guided 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 judgement against the Northern Kingdom. In the same way that a plumb line reveals the imperfection and structural weakness 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 bias against Amos who came from the Southern Kingdom. This is the Word of God.

This is what God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in God's hand. 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, 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." 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. Amen.

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 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus, "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ Jesus 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 Jesus 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 took off, 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 upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. 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 the Lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Amen.

The title of the meditation: “A Plumb Line Question”

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

Let us pray. Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

During our Steadfast Neighbor Service Week, we reflected on these two passages briefly one morning before beginning our work on neighbors’ homes. As we repaired and rebuilt porches and installed fences the device of the plumb line in measuring the soundness, straightness, and integrity of a vertical structure seemed especially relevant. We got it!

In the prophet Amos’ vision of God measuring the integrity of Israel as a nation with a plumb line, this ancient tool reveals the inconsistencies and incongruities within a society which claimed to walk with God and yet neglected the poor and marginal among them. There is resistance in the leadership to hear Amos’ words grounded in a desire to justify themselves.

In the gospel of Luke, we see a similar dynamic within the young lawyer. He asks Jesus the plumb line question “Who is my neighbor?” to justify himself. If my inheriting eternal life is dependent upon how I love my neighbor, give me a plumb line to measure how well I keep the law of love?

According to Joachim Jeremias, a German biblical scholar, the answer to this question was in dispute among first century Jews. *It was generally agreed that the term implied fellow-country men, including full proselytes (converted Gentiles), but there was disagreement about the exceptions...; and a widespread popular saying expected personal enemies. Hence Jesus was being asked 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.”*

A week following our country’s celebration of independence, we see parallels between first century Jews and the eighteenth century authors of our Constitution which permitted states to grant voting rights only to white men who owned land.

Initially it appears Jesus is connecting with the lawyer’s plumb line question in his story. 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 were alive and not a Jew, the priest would have no responsibility according to the law and would have acted within the plumb line of justice. The Levite’s behavior may have been a bit more questionable, but none the less, 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 plumb line 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 in a different direction to break through the façade religious people build to justify ourselves. Jesus brought a Samaritan into the story and in so doing stripped the lawyer of his justification. The hatred between the Jews and Samaritans had always been

strong and structurally sound. The Jews never forgave the Samaritans for intermarrying during the Assyrian exile (foretold by the prophet Amos) and viewed them as impure and racially inferior. To say there was irreconcilable hostility is an understatement. Of course, this kind of hostility is not unique to the Jews and Samaritans. Tribalism and racism have prevailed among peoples throughout history. 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 cannot even bring himself to say “Samaritan” but replies knowingly “the one who showed mercy.” The plumb line is brought to a new standard!

Consistent with his limitless love, Jesus not only urges the lawyer to include the marginalized Samaritan as a neighbor but also implores him when provided the opportunity along the way, to show mercy to those in need. Once again, Jesus cuts right through the niceties of religious talk and gets to the painful truth of our own unreasonable biases and prejudices. He did it then and he continues to do it today through his powerful, timeless teachings.

None of us can measure up to the plumb line of who God calls us to be and we would be wise to confess our shortcomings, own our biases and prejudices, and stop trying to justify ourselves to each other and to the One who is our Teacher, Carpenter, and Savior.

As we send our youth to Kentucky with a plumb line for their work rebuilding homes torn apart by tornadoes, as we bask in the privilege of being a part of repairing homes during our Steadfast Neighbor Service Week, as we welcome new members, and as we gather at the table for communion we do so with humility, gratitude, and joy ...it is well with our soul. Amen.