

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Plumb Line”

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Reverend Art Ritter

Amos 7:7-15

7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. ⁸And 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;*

*⁹the 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 centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said,

*“Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.”’*

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.’

14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycomore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”’

Every day a man used to walk by a clock shop, glance at a big clock in the display window, and then stop and set his own watch for that time. One day the owner of the store happened to be standing in the doorway of the shop. He recognized the man who walked by every day and said, “I see you set your watch by the large clock in the window. What kind of work do you do that demands such precise time?” The man replied, “I’m the watchman at the factory just down the street. Part of my job is to blow the five o’clock whistle at the plant daily closing. I blow the whistle when my watch, set to your clock, tells me it is five o’clock.” The clock shop owner was startled. “But you can’t do that!” he said. “I set the large clock in the window by your five o’clock whistle!”

I have been rather amazed at the reactions of some politicians who have found themselves in scandal. The mayor of Detroit, the governor of South Carolina, and a city councilwoman from Detroit—just to name a few. Each of these individuals seem to have had their hand caught in the proverbial cookie jar, even admitting that they had participated in an illegal or immoral action. Yet none of them seemed to be ashamed or remorseful about their deeds. In fact it seems if it weren’t for other people—like the media, they tell us that we would be much better off. We wouldn’t have to live with the knowledge that our government servants had done something wrong.

I thought of a couple examples from the past. Former mayor of New York City David Dinkins found himself in trouble with the Internal Revenue Service. His response to the press: “I haven’t committed a crime. What I did was fail to comply with the law.” George H.W. Bush’s budget director

Richard Darman was once asked why the president didn't keep a campaign to preserve wetlands. He replied, "The president didn't say that. He only read what was given to him in a speech." And finally it was good to see Marion Barry, the former mayor of Washington D.C. making the news again this week. I will always remember his famous quote as mayor. Barry said, "Outside of all of the killings, Washington D.C. has one of the lowest crime rates in the country."

The Scripture lesson this morning is from the story of the prophet Amos. In about 750 BC, Amos heard the word of the Lord calling him to prophesy to the nation Israel, the northern kingdom of that then-divided land. Amos left his home in the farm village of Tekoa located in the southern kingdom of Judah and traveled north to deliver a tough message to a people who would regard him as a crazy foreigner, an outsider whose opinion really didn't matter.

To top it off, it was a prosperous time for the people of Israel. Who wants to hear criticism when things are going well? Most people were living the life of comfort. Only a few of the poor were suffering. But society was corrupt and the rich were making much of their money off the misery of the poor. God was largely being ignored. The people were so arrogant and selfish that they figured that they didn't have the time or energy or need for God. And so Amos spoke to the people of Israel. He predicted God's punishment. He announced that Israel would fall to another nation. Needless to say, this wasn't a popular thing to say. No one, not even the temple priests wanted to hear what Amos had to say. But history reveals that his words were eventually fulfilled. In the year 721, the Assyrians conquered Israel.

Amos was not only an accurate prophet but a wonderful public speaker. He offered the Word of God to Israel as an object lesson. He saw God standing beside a wall, holding a plumb line. For those unfamiliar with plumb lines, they consist of a small but heavy object tied onto a long piece of string. When dropped from the top of a wall or a building, gravity allows the plumb line to set a straight and accurate standard that is perpendicular to the wall. If a wall has been built out of plumb, the only responsible thing to do is to tear it down because otherwise it will not stand long on its own strength.

I recall the first home that Laura and I purchased in Michigan years ago. Whenever we tried our hand at home improvement- wallpapering, new carpet, replacement windows- we discovered that all of the walls in the house were crooked. When a contractor came in to measure, he or she would stand back and scratch their heads as if they did not know what to do next. What they did was take more time, make special cuts, and charge us more. Somewhere during the construction it seems, someone had forgotten the plumb line.

Amos used God's expectation of justice and righteousness as a plumb line, as a standard for decision making and personal behavior. Rather than worshipping God, Israel was bowing before false gods. Rather than being concerned about the welfare of all, those with wealth and power were concerned about gaining more wealth and power. Rather than living according to God's intention, the people of Israel were living according to their own desires and wishes. God promised the people of Israel that "he would not pass them by." By that promise they expected loving support and approval. But God comes, God stops, God stoops, but sets a plumb line, a divine standard to measure the fidelity of faith. God holds us to a higher standard that we might want to measure ourselves.

Amos' vision of the plumb line symbolized God's unchanging demands and law to which those who profess to follow God are expected to conform. The plumb line was a series of not-so-subtle standards meant to convict. The illustration of the plumb line is a reminder to each of us to honestly examine the standards upon which we have built our lives and upon which we make our daily decisions. Dr. Arlene Nehring writes that Amos' plumb line forces us to ask some questions of ourselves today: How do we make our everyday decisions? How do we establish our priorities? What do we teach our children and grandchildren about the standard they should use in make their choices? Do our words and our actions seem to match?

Harvard University's Robert Coles, author of *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, writes that what our children desperately need is a moral purpose. Instead he says that "most children get parents who are very concerned about getting them into the right colleges, buying the best clothes for them, giving them an opportunity to live in neighborhoods where they'll lead fine and affluent lives and

where they can be given the best things, to go on interesting vacations, and all sorts of things.” Coles believes that more children need parents who use plumb lines. In his study Coles also points out the fact that sadly, many young people are brought up to be religious but then tend to find no connection between their faith and the choices they must make in life. Why am I supposed to be kind to others? What is the purpose of my life? What is good and what is evil?

A plumb line is like a moral compass, something that always points to the correct answer in any given ethical or life situation. There are some who believe we need to simply develop absolute truths, black and white, right vs. wrong; and teach everyone to follow those truths. But the complexity of life often doesn't allow for simple and clear responses. Amos wasn't calling for the people of Israel to heed the strict list of answers. He was calling for them to measure their action against the truth of God as it spoke to them that day.

Part of what we enjoy about participation within the Congregational way is that there are no creeds and no statements of faith. No one is here to tell you what you must believe. Here you aren't handed specific black and white answers to the gray moral questions of your life. But as a worshipping community and as the Body of Christ, we need to be about exploring, discussing, and sharing what matters in our life. We need to lift up the aspects of our faith which inform our decision-making and which we find speak the truth especially well given the ambiguity of our world. We need to tell others of where we might find answers when it seems as if answers are obsolete. We need to find God's intention revealed to us, in prayer and worship and Scripture and meditation and then lift high the plumb line to measure our action.

Noted preacher James Forbes once said, “From my perspective, Jesus the Christ could be viewed as God's plumb line, sent from heaven on a line to earth, and who he was, and what he did, and what he said, held up to a standard by which we were to measure the quality of our lives and by which we were to assess the righteousness of our nation.” I think he's right! While we may not choose to tell each other what to believe, and while we might sincerely acknowledge the complexities of our modern world, we can still have a standard by which to measure our choices and our behavior. We can hold up the standard of God's intention for God's people as we find it in Jesus the Christ and in the stories of the people of faith. That is the plumb line we need.