

## Plumb Line

A sermon on Amos 7:7-9

by Nancy Raca, July 9, 2016, Covenant United Methodist Church

I recently went to the chiropractor because I was having some pain in my back. When I went for my initial appointment, the doctor had me bend this way and that so she could look at my posture and spine and so forth. Turns out, one side of me is a little higher than the other. That is, my right shoulder sits just a little higher than my left. The doctor explained that this is probably something that has come about over a long period of time. Apparently a lot of the things I do in daily life, like sit at a computer, carry a purse, lug groceries in and out of the house -- always using my right arm predominantly -- have caused the muscles in my neck and shoulder to tighten and shorten. As a result, I've gotten out of alignment. I started out, at some point, straight up and down, but a whole bunch of little bad habits, over time, have led me to be significantly out of whack. And that is what's causing me pain. Bad choices. Over time. Lead to problems.

In today's Scripture, the prophet Amos has a vision of the Lord standing by a wall with a plumb line. The Lord tells Amos that the Lord is setting a plumb line in the middle of the people of Israel. The implication is pretty clear: when measured against this line, the people of Israel are *not* going to look upright. They're going to look pretty crooked.

In fact, the book of Amos shows us that injustice and economic oppression was rampant in the kingdom of Israel back then, which was sometime in the mid-700s

BCE. It was in the reign of King Jeroboam II, a time of power and prosperity, when the people of Israel assumed that their privilege and affluence were evidence of God's blessings to them as the chosen people.

They had forgotten their suffering as slaves in Egypt. They were, at that time, at peace with their neighbors. But, a few rich people had become very rich, at the expense the poor. Their religious observance was disconnected from their social ethics. They had lost their way, forgotten their heritage.

By the time we get to today's reading, which comes from Chapter 7, Amos has been telling the people to get with it for some time. Over and over again. He has urged them to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a perennial stream." But they have not listened. They have failed to act. They have failed to get their house in plumb with God's standard.

The resulting judgment from God is harsh. God says, "I will never again forgive them." And then God continues, "The shrines of Isaac will be made desolate, and the holy places of Israel will be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

This image of God is angry, and vengeful. Maybe Amos is just warning Israel of what *could* happen if they don't change. But maybe God really is fed up. Maybe God wants Israel to take this seriously. After all, you can't build on a wall that's out of plumb. It needs to be torn down. And God looks just about ready to do it.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy on those 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE Israelites and Lord have mercy on us today. Because our society, too, has gotten out of alignment. We are not plumb. I believe that the United States was established as a great and promising nation. But over the past two and a half centuries, we have made some mistakes. Some bad decisions. We've gotten into bad habits. Lots of things, over time, have been adding up, and now our society is in danger of caving in.

Consider the events of this week. On Tuesday, 37-year-old Alton Sterling, a black man, was shot dead by police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Graphic cell phone video footage was all over the Internet, showing Alton pinned to the ground before he was shot. And then Wednesday, police outside St. Paul, Minnesota, shot and killed 32-year-old Philando Castile (also a black man) during a traffic stop for a *broken tail light*. His girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter were in the car. Again, there's a cell phone video – this time filmed just after the shooting, as Phil bleeds out and a police officer continues to hold a gun through the window.

Lord, have mercy.

Somewhere, we have gone very wrong. These are not the first examples of police shootings, of black men gunned down by people who are meant to protect us. This is not the first time that demonstrators have taken to the streets, and the Internet, with the call "Black Lives Matter."

And yet, nothing changes. Like the people of Israel 2,700 years ago, it seems like we are not paying attention. We have let things build up until they've gotten out of

hand. We are not acting to fix the great discrepancy in the way groups of people are treated here. We are not plumb, as a society.

And, as a white person, I speak mainly for white society here. We are the ones with privilege in America, and yet we do nothing. We hear “Black Lives Matter” and we respond with “All Lives Matter.” *We don’t get it.* We defend our right to carry guns and then go silent when a black man is killed exercising that right. *We don’t get it.* We watch videos of killings on the Internet and numb ourselves to it as though it is a television show on a sound stage. *We don’t get it.* We turn off the TV and ignore what’s going on because we can afford to do so. *We don’t get it.* We have gone astray. Like the ancient Israelites, we have fooled ourselves into thinking that our good fortune comes because we have been chosen by God. We have reveled in our own privilege while missing the fact that millions of people – millions of *Americans* – are subjected to the institutionalized racism *we* have set up in our society.

We are leaning farther and farther away from that plumb line.

Lord, have mercy.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot continue down this path. We are running out of chances. We have not kept covenant with our God and we are going to – no, we are *already* – suffering the consequences. Consequences like senseless death.

Consequences like peaceful demonstrators and journalists being arrested. Like police officers fearing for their lives. Like anger and bitterness among friends, co-workers, neighbors. Like the splintering of our society. If ever there was a time when God might decide to be fed up with us, it seems to me like this is the time.

So what can we do? It's not an easy question, but it is one we *must* wrestle with. I think we need to have more conversations about race, more conversations with our own police force. Several organizations in Rochester, including the public library, are hosting discussions on race in our community. Go to one. I also think we can look more closely at our own attitudes toward race. This week in your e-newsletter I am going to include a link to something called the Black-White Implicit Bias Test. It's a series of questions developed by Harvard University that are meant to assess whether a person has a subconscious affinity for black people or white people. Please, take it. It takes less than five minutes. It's not perfect, but it will give you something to think about. Also, take a look at [staywoke.org](http://staywoke.org). Learn something about the Black Lives Matter movement and see what you can do to help.

Beyond that, pray. Repent for inaction, for looking away. I believe that, as Christians, as the Church, we can fix this. Why? Because unlike the Israelites, God has given us a new and undeniable plumb line: Jesus Christ.

Jesus' life, his mission, his faithfulness all the way to death are like a big, bright line showing us how to live. Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed. Jesus put the lost and the least and the outcasts *first*. That is what we are called to do. That is the legacy Jesus gave us as Christians. That is what we need to make a priority in our society. *That* is the plumb line. We are not living up to it.

Lord, have mercy.

