

Sunday, July 11, 2021
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10 (Year B)

Amos 7.7-15

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/192786022811432>

(Sermon begins at about 23:20)

“Plumb Lines”

My heart is heavy, my mind is muddled, and my spirit is weeping. A general sense of dis-ease that is, at times, visceral. I imagine some of you—many of you—can relate. I’ve been feeling this way for the last year or more, although it just seems to have become more acute as time goes on. Certainly, the pandemic is a cause for part of this. But if anything, the pandemic—or rather the changes and restrictions the pandemic brought about—provided space for what is going on around us to be made felt in a way that might not have happened in normal times.

I find that I am more aware of and concerned about the fragile nature of our society. The pandemic is certainly a major contributor to this awareness. How the general health of not only our population, but also our economy, is contingent upon such things as face masks, social distancing requirements, and vaccinations. Each seemingly simple, innocuous measures that have somehow become politicized in some areas of our nation, in some parts of our society. Items and actions meant to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and others, have become statements of political ideology. When did politics become more important than protecting the health and wellbeing of our people? And what does this have to say about loving our neighbors as ourselves?

I find that I am more aware of and concerned about the whole issue of racial injustice. An issue that has been with us for centuries, which we have struggled with throughout our history, but which, once again, has been brought back to our collective consciousness during the last year. That we, as a nation which holds itself up as a model and a beacon for freedom and equality, that we, as a nation which views itself as the world’s authority and judge on matters of human rights, still cannot insure equal rights and equal access to justice for all our people. That those who are not white are not viewed as equal or as valuable as those who are white. We see this playing out in so many different areas of our society. In many areas, persons of color are treated as other; treated as less than some of us. That communities of color do not have access to the same resources that some of us take for granted. That in a time of pandemic, communities of color have a far higher rate of coronavirus cases and less access to vaccines. Specific examples of racial injustice go on and on, but these are just a few. How is it that we profess uphold basic human rights on the world stage while denying those same rights to many of our own people? And what does this have to say about loving our neighbors as ourselves?

I find that I am more aware of and concerned about the fragile nature of our democracy. How over the past few decades, our political parties have become more and more polarized and are no longer willing to even try to compromise. Instead, our elected leaders are making outright statements that they will not support anything the other party tries to do. As if unwillingness to

work together for the wellbeing of the people they are elected to serve is not enough, there is a general disregard for the fundamental principles on which our nation was founded. This all came to head on January 6th when armed thugs led an insurrection against the Capitol in Washington, DC, in an attempt to overturn election results. And despite such a violent and heinous attack, our elected officials are unwilling to even investigate what was not only an assault on our democracy, but an assault on their place of work, a threat to their very lives.

But the attacks against our democracy were not confined to armed insurrection. In state after state, there are blatant efforts to prevent some of our citizens from being able to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Implementing policies and procedures in the name of protecting the integrity of the voting system, which are thinly veiled measures to protect against certain types of people from making their voices heard. And for good measure, implementing procedures that, in some states, will allow legislatures or other officials to overturn election results if they do not like how the people voted. How can our nation, which has been the gold-standard of democratic government for 245 years, willingly embrace tactics we would condemn if implemented by any other government in the world? And what does this have to say about loving our neighbors as ourselves?

These are just a few of the areas that have come to the fore over the last year or so. These added on top of previous concerns about our environment, climate change, homelessness, the lack of a livable minimum wage, and so many other areas that make my heart ache, my mind spin, and my soul cry out. Issues that reduce me to tears on a regular basis. I'm sure you have your own list of concerns. Those things that make your heart ache, your mind spin, your soul cry out. Those things that twist your stomach into knots and keep you awake at night.

As I struggle with how to make sense of all of this, how to come to terms with all of this, how to deal with all of this as a person of faith, I am given hope through the words of the Prophet Amos. Before I go there, it is probably worth giving a little insight into just who Amos was. Amos is one of the twelve Minor Prophets. Not minor in that he was of less importance than some of the other prophets. The term "minor" actually refers to the fact that the writings of these twelve prophets are much shorter than those of the so-called Major Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Amos lived in the eighth century BCE and was active as a prophet between about 760 and 755 BCE. While from the southern Kingdom of Judah, Amos served as a prophet in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II. Despite bringing great prosperity and glory to the Kingdom of Israel during his 41-year reign, the Book of Kings condemns Jeroboam for doing "what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 14.24a). Despite being the most prosperous period in the history of the Kingdom of Israel up to that time, Jeroboam's reign was also marked by great social injustices—primarily oppression and exploitation of the poor. Amos' oracles were primarily condemnations against the king and the ruling class for their oppression and treatment of the poor and needy members of society. A call for repentance against rampant social oppression and for the establishment of social justice.

In the oracles just before today's Old Testament reading, Amos conveys visions of Israel's destruction—one oracle being of a plague of locusts and one oracle being of fire raining down

on the land. Both times, Amos prays to God, and God relents. And then Amos delivers the oracle we hear today. An oracle in which God essentially says, “no more.” In the words of Amos: “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 his 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; 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’” (Amos 7.7-9).

Now for those who are not familiar with the concept, a plumb line is a simple device comprised of a string with a weight on the end, called a plumb bob. This device is used to make sure that a structure, like a wall, is perfectly aligned vertically. A simple device, but still used today in carpentry and masonry. What the image of the plumb line in Amos’ oracle was meant to convey is that God had looked at Israel and found it askew; not aligned with God’s will, with God’s values. Israel needed to straighten up, needed to be realigned. Alas, Jeroboam did not heed Amos’ warning. The Kingdom of Israel did not change its ways. And some 15 to 20 years later, the Assyrian Captivity would begin with the Assyrian Empire swooping in and taking control of large chunks of Israel, turning it into a puppet state. And within another 20 years, the northern Kingdom of Israel was decimated, wiping out the ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel that comprised the Northern Kingdom—never to be heard from again. Fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy? Sure looks that way.

Now I’m not making any prophecies about what is going to happen to our nation based on the dis-ease I have expressed. While I, and many others, have their concerns about the current state of our nation and the world, God has not, to my knowledge, planned our imminent destruction. Nonetheless, I see increasing concern among many in our society that we are not heading in the right direction. And many within the religious establishment would agree with the image in Amos’ oracle—that if God were to look at our society and measure it against a plumb line, we would be found lacking. That our values are not in alignment with God’s values. Or maybe a better way of putting it is that even though our stated values might be in alignment with God’s values, the reality is that we do not practice those values as well as we ought. That our implementation of our stated values is not in alignment with God’s values.

That said, we still have an opportunity to make changes. To repent. To get ourselves back on track. To get back in alignment with God’s values. To avert the modern-day equivalent of the Assyrian Captivity. Because while God uses the plumb line to assess how we are faring with respect to following his commandments, we, too, can use that same plumb line to help us get back on track. In the prophecies of Amos, the plumb line is used as a means of assessment. But in actual practice, as used by a carpenter or a mason or a bricklayer, the plumb line is used as a guide. It is used to measure the trueness of the work in progress. Is the structure being built true—is it absolutely vertical? Is it in correct alignment? And if not, the carpenter or mason or bricklayer makes necessary adjustments to ensure that the structure being constructed ends up where it needs to be, how it needs to be. In perfect alignment.

The Gospel is our plumb line. The commandments of God are our plumb line: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . [and] love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the

law and the prophets” (Mt 22.37-40). In other words, this sums up and is the foundation for all of God’s laws. As those who follow God, as those who follow Christ, this is the plumb line we use to measure our own lives, our own actions. And where we find ourselves lacking, we have the opportunity to make adjustments, to get back on track.

And while none of us can singlehandedly effect changes to our societal and governmental structures, we can do something. We can and do have an influence through how we choose to use our resources, through how we choose to exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens not only of the Kingdom of God, but as citizens of this nation.

How do I choose to spend my time? Is how I use my time, the activities I pursue, in alignment with God’s values?

How do I choose to spend my money? Is how I use my money, is what I spend my money on, in alignment with God’s values?

How do I choose to treat other people? Is how I treat others, particularly those who are viewed as “other,” in alignment with God’s values?

How do I choose to vote? Is how I vote, are the candidates that I vote for, are the policies and legislation those candidates support, truly in alignment with God’s values?

We need to be brutally honest with ourselves in answering these questions. No trying to fudge the results, no trying to rationalize, to try to make ourselves look good. Remember, while we have a plumb line to help get us back on track, God uses that same plumb line to assess where we are and how we are doing in living our lives according to his commandments. It is not our mental gymnastics to try to rationalize how well we are doing, but God’s assessment that counts.

Oracles and prophecies, such as Amos made, were never absolute visions of what would happen in the future. They were merely warnings of what might happen if people did not follow God’s commandments. If we look around us, we see warning signs that things are not going as they should in our society. But the good news is that we can do something about it. We can use the plumb line that God has set in the midst of us, his people, to discern what changes we need to make to put ourselves in alignment with God’s values before it really is too late.