

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JULY 11, 2010
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37; Colossians 1:1-14

STANDING BY THE PLUMB LINE OF GOD

The idea of a plumb line has always fascinated me, and I like the picture on the bulletin today because of that fascination. My interest in plumb lines began years ago when I took on the job of wallpapering a room in our more-than-one-hundred-year-old house in Illinois. I have a pretty good visual perception about pictures being straight and appliances being level, things like that. So, when I began wallpapering I really didn't think I'd have any trouble keeping the strips of paper lined up straight. I was wrong!

The official definition of "plumb line" is this, "a cord from which a metal weight is suspended pointing directly to the earth's center of gravity; used to determine the vertical from a given point." The wallpaper I was hanging had a lightly colored vertical stripe running through it on the left side. After I had hung a few sheets I was feeling rather proud of myself, so I decided to take a break. I got a cup of coffee and sat in a chair in the middle of the room to survey my work. Uh-oh, that little stripe in my wallpaper didn't look quite right to my eye. So, I took a tape measure and measured the distance from the corner of the room at the top across to the far edge of my last sheet. Then, I measured the same distance at the bottom. There was an inch and a half difference between the two! If I kept going as I was the stripe in the wallpaper would soon be horizontal instead of vertical. I had to quickly remove the paper I had hung before it dried and then start over. Someone, probably Gordon suggested that I might want to use a plumb line, which at that time I knew nothing about.

What had happened to me with the wallpaper hanging is what happens to us in our daily living. We are so involved in our here and now that we don't step back every once in awhile and get a look at the whole picture. If I had stepped back from my work

after each sheet was hung and took a good look I might have been able to see what was happening before things got out of hand. I should have used a plumb line.

In the days of Amos the prophet the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer." The people of God had become a rebellious and a idol-worshiping people, and God through the prophet was going to give them warning of the destruction which was to come upon them. The depravity of Israel was of the very worst kind. Bethel was a place of worship of pagan gods and even a golden calf. Over and over again the Lord had recited their evil pursuits, and over and over he had listed the steps he had taken to try to bring them to their senses. In chapter four of the book of Amos these words of the Lord are spoken six times, "Yet, you have not returned to me says the Lord." Before that in the first two chapters of the book the terrible sins of the people in the various provinces are laid out– sins so terrible that they would surely receive an R rating if put into a movie. The Lord held back from punishment giving them every chance to repent and to turn from their wicked ways but they would not. They could not stand alongside the plumb line of the Lord God!

Friends, how do you and I stand beside the plumb line of God? How do we measure up? What is the rule we should follow in our daily lives as Christians?

Hear The Parable of the Good Samaritan Luke 10:25-37

25. On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
26. "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"
27. He answered: " '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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"
28. "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29. But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30. In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 36. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37. The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

You are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." Okay, loving God should be easy, right? God is always good. God is always listening to your prayers. God has blessed you in so many ways. Loving God is no so difficult, well maybe a little difficult because you have to love with everything you've got— with your heart, soul, strength and mind. It's hard, but it's doable, as they say. But then there is that other part, the part tacked on to the end, you have to love your neighbor as yourself! Some neighbors are just not what you might call loveable. And who does Jesus mean when he is talking about neighbors? For that matter who is Jesus really speaking to in this parable?

Jay Leno from time to time sends reporters out to ask questions about the Bible

of people on the street. One question was, "Do you know who the Good Samaritan is?" The answer was, "He was some guy who did a good deed." "Oh", the reporter says, "I see. Do you know anything else about him?" "Yea," the man answers, "I think they named a hospital after him." The reporter continues, "Did you know he was also a character in the Bible?" "No," the man says, "I wouldn't know about that."

The truth is that the man we call the Good Samaritan in the Bible story from the book of Luke could stand straight alongside the plumb line of God. The story, like the story in Amos is about judgement, judgement not of unbelievers, but of the people of God. Amos spoke to the Israelites who were chosen by God as his own. They were loved and nurtured and cared for by God. God revealed himself to them, but they turned their backs on God and judgement came down upon them. They were exiled from the land given to them by God, captured by their enemies and deported to Assyria. They would die in a pagan land.

In the New Testament, a lawyer stands up and asks Jesus a very important question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks a question in return, something he often did. Jesus asks him what the law said, after all he was an expert in the law. And the lawyer answered, "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, Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agrees with the answer, but the lawyer perhaps seeking to get the last word, in a kind of one-up-man-ship move asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus gives an answer the lawyer does not expect, an answer which explains to us how we can measure up before God. Jesus tells of the poor man who was just minding his own business going down the road to Jericho, a dangerous stretch of highway. He was attacked by robbers, beaten, and his clothes and other possessions stolen. He was left bloody, dirty, and half-dead in a ditch by the side of the road.

In a while, a priest, a man of God who knew the Law and the teachings of his faith came by the place where the man lay. Seeing the man lying there all filthy and disgusting and having important matters to take care of, he passed on the other side of the road. Better to stay away from trouble, he surely must have been thinking. Then, another man of God, a Levite came along. All priests were of the tribe of Levi, so this man was of the priestly group as well. He, too, could not be troubled by the bothersome problem of a man dying of wounds and lying beside the road. The Levite passed him by.

Then came a Samaritan, one of those weird, oddly dressed, strange acting Samaritans who were so hated by the Jews. When he saw the man lying there, he took pity on him and stopped to help him. He anointed his wounds and bandaged them. Then he put the wretched man on his own donkey and took him to the nearest inn where he put him into the hands of the innkeeper for care. The Samaritan man paid the innkeeper in advance and promised to pay more if required, for his heart of mercy was not stingy.

Jesus ended the story by asking one more question of the expert in the law. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who had mercy on him." And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise.

People often want to know what will happen to all the atheists, or what will happen to the Muslims, or what will happen to the Jews? People want to know how God will judge those who don't believe in Jesus Christ. But, friends, the Bible teaches a lot about how God will judge us— we who claim Christ. I'm not talking about heaven or hell, but about how God will judge what you have done with what you have been given. Have you loved God not only with your heart, soul, strength and mind; but have

you loved God with your words, your actions, your money, your time? Have you loved God enough to love those he has created? Have you loved your neighbor— enough? Have you shown mercy? It is fruitless to spend time worrying about what God will do about the spiritual state of other people. Jesus said “Go and do likewise.” Go into the world as it is and be Christ to all you meet, for it is then that you can stand beside that plumb line of God and know that you measure up.

Barbara Johnson wrote this humorous modern-day version of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there."

An objective person came along and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there."

A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into a pit."

A mathematician calculated how he fell into the pit.

A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit.

A fundamentalist said, "You deserve your pit."

An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A charismatic said, "Just confess that you're not in a pit."

An optimist said, "Things could be worse."

A pessimist said, "Things will get worse."

Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!

Do you want to be straight with the plumb line of God? Do you want to measure up? Be like Jesus who is in the business of lifting people up out of the pits of life. Love God completely and your neighbor too! Be a Good Samaritan! Be a Christian! God be with you as you do! Amen.

