

July 10, 2016
Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37
Time to Repair the Jericho Road
Rev. Carrie Bail

Part I: Word of God for all Ages (First part of 8 a.m. sermon)

Who knows what this is? (A plumb-bob, or a plumb-line)

How do you know? What people use this? (Builders, architects)

Why do they need it?

I want to tell you two stories about this plumb-bob. The first is really old. About 800 years before Jesus, there was a man named Amos. He was a prophet. (What's that? A person who speaks God's word to other people.) God showed Amos a plumbline and said "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people."

Then Amos had to tell some really bad news to God's people, because the way they were living was not straight, it was not "true" (explain that word) Ever since then, as people of God, we know that the things we do can be compared to God's plumbline, to what is straight and true.

Here is the second story. When I was a teenager in a Congregational Church (long, long ago) I had a minister, Rev. Paul Sinn, who was great with us kids. He did his best to teach us what was straight and true. It was during another time of lots of social upheaval during the Vietnam War and not everybody was happy with him.

At that time, my father was one of the leaders of the congregation, and a good friend with the Reverend . When Paul finally decided to leave our conflicted church and go to another position, my father sent him a letter of thanks and a gift which was on his desk when he got to his new office. What do you think that gift was? (Plumb) My father wanted Rev. Sinn to know that his actions were straight and true, just like God wanted them to be. It hung in his office for the rest of his life.

But, that's not the end of the story. Many years after that, after I was ordained as a pastor and came back to a church in New England. Rev. Sinn came to the celebration of my installation (when I became their official minister). He brought me a gift. Do you know what it was? (this plumb bob) Ever since then it has hung in my office, reminding me of what is straight and true.

Part II:

So now the sixty-five million dollar question is: how do we know, really know, what is straight and true, what is right and wrong. If it's about building a straight wall, there are some good objective measures to tell us, like a plumbline. I'm sure the builders and architects among us will tell us there are now much more technologically advanced instruments which perform a similar function. What we are measuring – a right angle between the wall and its base - is very objective, or at least as objective as any other property that obeys the laws of physics.

I'm also sure that if I opened the mic to some of these experts sitting among us, they would give me lots of reasons why straight is not always straight. There is that tricky little thing called the "Heisenberg principle" (variously named the uncertainty principle) that reminds us no observation can be made that is entirely objective, not only because of a minute fuzziness in nature, because also because it has to take into account that someone is doing the observing and may have individual variations, even if that scientist is as precise as is humanly possible. A physicist explains: the act of observation affects the particle being observed.

It gets equally confusing when we discuss what it means to have a conscience. As a Baby Boomer, I think I'm permanently cursed to have an image of Jiminy Cricket appear whenever I hear the word "conscience." (The movie was Pinocchio, for those of you who are too young.) He – or she, or cis , I never particularly associated the cricket with a gender – sits on your shoulder and whispers into your ear what is the "right" thing to do. In other popular images that figure is an angel, while the devil sits on the opposite side giving very crooked and false advice. We all seem to believe that we innately know what is "right" without realizing how many images of Jiminy Cricket, or Aesop's fables or Bible stories, we absorbed as children in a particular family in a particular culture. The Heisenberg principle still applies: that no matter how

internally clear and absolute the sense of knowing right from wrong seems to you, it is at least partially affected by your own point of view. There is always an observer.

So how DO we know what kind of behavior God wants from us if we cannot always rely on our internal conscience? For Amos and the other prophets, indeed for all the people in the Old Testament stories, right and wrong was specifically defined by God's laws. Did you know that Jews to this day know that there are 613 mitzvah in their holy Word? For Amos and people of his time, it was a plumb line made up of those laws. Here is how you measure up, or don't; and then God will treat you accordingly, punishment included.

In our NT scriptures, the primary understanding of what is straight and true comes not from the written Law, but from the living example of Jesus, the man of Nazareth. At the beginning of today's lesson, one of the lawyers, whose vocation was to study the scriptures, asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered with words we all know: "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."

What follows is arguably more important than the words themselves: the famous and well loved story of the Good Samaritan, a lived example of the loved commandment. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Simply answered, it is anyone who has a need. And the irony is not lost on the lawyer: the one who is moved with pity is NOT someone who has spent a lifetime checking the words of the law for straightness and truth. It is one of the despised Samaritans, a group of people who the Jews believed had corrupted God's word over the centuries.

Our society loves the story of the Good Samaritan precisely because it makes walking the straight and true path of God so simple. Whenever you see any other person suffering, do your best to ease their pain and meet their immediate need, even if it means taking some burden onto yourself. We church folk are often very good at Good Samaritan charity, especially when confronted with individual human need. There's a homeless person without food or a coat: give them one! There's an at-risk child who needs some tutoring or some breakfast: provide it! There is a sick child with a family that has no place to stay: give them housing! It's pretty easy to

measure our plumbline against that. Have compassion on your needy neighbor. Love them as you love yourself.

We like the story of the Good Samaritan, because it is relatively easy to identify the needs of a particular individual and to address them, and when we've done it successfully, we feel good about ourselves.

Up to here it's the sermon I intended to preach at the beginning of this week, the importance of loving and tending to your neighbor as the true measure of how God wants us to live. The original title went into the OOW, and then this week happened. I'm sure you've all heard the old story supposedly about the theologian Karl Barth who said to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This week the newspaper – or the cell phone, or the television or radio – wherever you get your news – got incredibly heavy. It seems as if the whole world has exploded in violence.

Of course it's always happening somewhere in the world, but in our nation it came home to roost this week: Tuesday in Baton Rouge when Alton Sterling was killed by policemen; Wednesday night outside Minneapolis, when Philando Castile was shot in his car by a policeman; Thursday when an angry and trained black veteran reacted by murdering policemen serving a peaceful rally in Dallas. What oh what shall we do?

Here I ask your indulgence to add another violence that is very close to my family's heart. This week military violence has again broken out in Juba, South Sudan, a city I have visited twice where the majority of my husband's family lives, including his 88 year old mother. He also has been intending to fly there from Cairo this coming week to see her; now he may not be able to do so. Please keep us all in your prayers.

In all these cases we should act as Good Samaritans, certainly. We must bind up the wounded. We ought to comfort the grieving. We should lament and cry out for justice in the marketplace. Once again we lift our voices for gun control so that individuals in our country cannot carry weapons of war in our midst. Once again we lift our voices for better education of all civil

servants who are supposed to protect us but have failed in too many instances. Once again we lift our voices in protest of racism and confess the need to examine the roots of white privilege. We have been here before.

Much as I want to encourage all of you to be Good Samaritans in any and all of these situations, I also pose a different viewpoint, one rarely considered in studying this parable. In a sermon a few years back, I asked a different question: who are the robbers? We talk about all the other characters in the story. We are invited to imagine ourselves as the priest or the Levite, the Good Samaritan, or sometimes even the victim. But why not as the robbers? Are they people, too, or are they just a literary foil whose only reason to exist is to produce a wounded victim? Or is there something desperately important about why these criminals seem to infest the road between Jerusalem and Jericho?

That road, we are told, was very, very steep, with a huge difference in elevation between the two cities, 3000 feet over 17 miles. Because of this, it provided lots of good ambush spots for thieves to hide and then attack unsuspecting travelers. Probably one of the best spots in all Israel if one has to resort to theft for a livelihood.

Perhaps the real question is: why are there so many people who have become thieves, who have to resort to violent attack of other people for their money, who are having trouble just surviving on the margins of society? What is the big picture here?

There's no doubt that the social and economic oppression created by the Roman occupation in Jesus' time caused a lot of poverty and displacement because of its tax system. This injustice was a big part of what Jesus was working to heal. Jesus understood that the robbers along the Jericho road are human beings, too.

It seems to me that we are all walking along a modern and equally dangerous Jericho Road. Social and economic oppression have made it this way, and it's becoming more rather than less dangerous. We could talk about how the black population, an underclass ever since the Emancipation more than 150 years ago, has seen less benefit as the economy returns from

recession. We could talk about how the lack of equalizing economic actions after the Civil War led to the development of a permanent underclass. We could talk about the astronomical rate of unemployment among young black men, or the impossibility of supporting a family on minimum wage without benefits. Clearly we need to be about repairing the problems which have created the dangerous Jericho road.

Years ago, just after 9-11, I read a book by Donald Shriver, an ethics professor from Union Theological School. The book is "Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds." He begins with the examples of two nations that had committed grave injustices against a particular group: Germany under the Nazis, and South Africa under apartheid. He talks about how in both cases a process of apology and reconciliation had gone a long way toward healing. Then he describes straightforwardly how our great nation has done grievous wrong both in the genocide of Native Americans and in the enslavement and theft of labor of African slaves. We have never made serious attempts to reconcile the wrongs that were committed and Shriver believes we will continue to be haunted until we do so.

Initiating a society-wide discussion about racism and its roots and its impacts is long overdue. How many times can we just sit back and ask for prayer? It is time to act.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said this in a speech "A Time to Break Silence. "

"A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway."

Today we are a nation in mourning. For Alton, for Philando, for the Dallas police officers. We need prayer; we need education; we need people of good will reaching across boundaries. We need gun control. We need police officer education with regard both to race and mental health.

But above all, we need to commit to repairing that Jericho road so that some folks will not have to steal or beg just to survive. God guide us, for we need some hope.