

Amos 7:7-17, Luke 10:25-37

Amos is an interesting figure amongst the prophets, isn't he? He is not a person set apart like Samuel, he does not have some grand call story like Isaiah. He is not a priest, or the son of a prophet, but a shepherd, a gardener, a dresser of Sycamore trees. Amos is about as ordinary a person as you can find in the ancient world. And yet God took him from following the flock and said, "Prophecy to my people Israel." And Amos follows God's command to the letter by refusing to flee to the southern kingdom of Judah and rather speaks the word of God to the kings of Israel and famously saying things like, "Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land... cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals... The Lord has sworn by himself, "I will never forget anything they have done.'" If that sounds like something that needs to be said in our halls of government today, you begin to understand why our passage in Amos today carries so much importance.

At the beginning of the chapter we find Amos recounting the vision the Lord showed him of God's locusts devastating the harvest and a fire that would consume the land. Each time Amos begged for Israel's life, and each time God showed mercy and relented. Finally God brings Amos to the city's wall where our passage for today starts and says, ""What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," Amos replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer." As I showed our young people, a plumb line is a long string or rope fixed with a weight kind of like a pendulum. It is a carpenter's or stone mason's tool used to make sure their work stands upright without deviation. The plumb line does not acquiesce to the carpenters' desires but demands the craftsmen's work meet its standard. God places the plumbline in the midst of a rebellious people as a standard for them to meet, to be judged against. But what is that standard? In our world we are judged by many standards – wealth, power, intelligence, influence, beauty – but I doubt any of these are God's standard. So what do we do? Where do we look?

If you think God using a carpenter's tool to represent the standard by which to judge the people is a mistake I ask you to reconsider, because I believe nothing in scripture is coincidence. To find God's plumb line we can look to the carpenter himself, one Jesus of Nazareth. Today we find Jesus teaching among the people when he is asked, ""Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. The man says, ""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.'" And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Out of this conversation comes two questions: who is my neighbor? And how do I love them? The man asks Jesus the first, but Jesus answers the second. I would assume many of us have heard the parable of the good Samaritan a fair few times. It goes like this: a man is robbed by bandits on the road, first a priest comes but passes by, second a Levite but he also passes by, finally a Samaritan comes bandages the man's wounds, puts him on his own donkey, walks him to the inn, and ensures he will be cared for. The end of

the story Jesus asks, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The man replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

In the words of Jesus, the plumb line, the standard is mercy. And this echoes throughout the scripture. Hear the words of the prophet Micah, “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” When Jesus calls Matthew to be a disciple he says, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” Jesus says to the pharisees, “For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Mercy is the standard. But how do we show mercy? What did the Samaritan do? He saw a man from Jerusalem on the side of the road; he cared not who the man was. Jerusalem and Samaria were enemies, yet the Samaritan bandaged the man’s wounds. Was that mercy? Yes. But the Samaritan goes further, he offers his own animal and secures a place for the man to stay. This is mercy. But the Samaritan goes further, having

mercy on the inn keeper by paying him upfront and promising to return. Ideally the inn keeper then takes up the mantle of mercy to care for the man and so on and on and on. It is remarkable. By showing mercy the Samaritan becomes a neighbor to the man and the inn keeper, and thus fulfills the law to love your neighbor as yourself.

Dear church, this kind of mercy is needed in our world today. The plumb line asks not how we will pay for it, or how we will make sure we give only to those really in need. The plumbline only demands that mercy given. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, giving the resident alien an equal share of what we possess. But beyond that, it leads us to possess the willingness to extend help and kindness to those society and history would deem our enemies, it leads us to the conviction not just to address their immediate needs, but to offer them what we have at our disposal, and to return to them again and again. Mercy asks not “who is my neighbor”, but leads us to become a neighbor to everyone – by showing them the mercy

God has set as our standard. Indeed this is needed in the world – and needed quickly – but it is also needed within the walls of this building.

We are not exempt from the plumb line. In this period of transition, mercy toward one another is God's wish for us. With PSK's departure, and the passing of several faithful pillars of this congregation, we are, as a community, in some respects like the man at the side of the road. These wounds do not heal as easily as we would like. We need to be able to recognize the goodwill and mercy the people around us are trying to give to us. We need to be ready to receive it in good faith. We need to resist the temptation to take advantage of these people who are just trying to do the right thing. Because taking advantage of merciful people ensures that mercy will never be extended again, and all that does is draw us further from God. How easy would it have been for the inn keeper to charge the good Samaritan double what he actually spent? But wouldn't that defeat the purpose of the parable and undermine Jesus' exhortation to love our neighbors and show mercy to those around us?

So we have to be ready and willing to receive mercy. And yet as followers of Jesus we are also called to be like the Samaritan. To offer kind words, and faithful prayers, but also healing touches, hot meals, and to be ready to put aside our own needs to lighten the load of someone else. Furthermore the parable teaches us that it is up to each of us to show mercy to one another we cannot wait for our new pastor to do it for us. In the Lutheran Church we believe in the priesthood of all believers which means each of us is called to the work of the Church in some respect – and first and foremost the Church is to show the mercy of God everywhere it goes. Just think, if the Samaritan waited for the priest or the Levite to help, the man would have died because they had already passed by.

This standard of mercy is lofty and if I am honest it is impossible to achieve by our own power. How can we, a crooked and rebellious people, even through our best effort possibly stand upright against the judgement of a perfect God? God is the only one who can stand upright against their own plumb line. But lucky for us a good carpenter does not immediately discard a piece of wood when it does not stand plumb on its own.

Rather the carpenter helps it by moving it, or shaping it, or bracing it until it can stand on its own. In Jesus Christ we find our carpenter who moves us, shapes us, and braces us – sometimes with fine grit sandpaper, and sometimes with a buzz saw. But all the while he is making us fit for purpose. Jesus is our good Samaritan; he heals all wounds. He offered us not his animal, but his body on the cross, paying upfront for our sins. He returned from the tomb to ensure our redemption was completed. He dwells in us by the power of the Holy Spirit and returns to us again and again in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion to shape us into people who are capable of love and mercy.

And Jesus did not wait for permission, he took to the streets preaching repentance and forgiveness, healing on the sabbath, breaking bread with the sinners, bringing children into his midst, being honest in the company of hypocrites. And even there Jesus showed mercy, by telling them not what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear to be a part of the kingdom of God. He showed mercy in the garden by laying down the sword, he showed mercy in the court of the high priest by turning the other cheek. He

showed mercy to Pilate by revealing the nature of his kingdom. He showed mercy on the cross by refusing to save himself, thus saving us all. He showed mercy in the Resurrection by giving us a glimpse of the Kingdom on earth. Thus says the Lord, “I have set a plumb line in the midst of you my people, I will spare you no longer; I have shown you mercy, go and do likewise.” Amen.