



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

July 13, 2025; Proper 10C: Amos 7:7-17; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-3

My father-in-law was a builder. He had his own remodeling business but was most happy fixing things – from houses to appliances to antique furniture and chairs. He was a man of many bad jokes and few words, so for our more than 30 years together we bonded by doing projects. Early in my time in Maine, someone donated an old wood playground set to my congregation, complete with a slide, swings, and a nifty tower. It was great but a little wobbly, so I asked my father-in-law to help put braces in to make it more secure. Though he liked having the image of a laid-back guy, he was quite serious when it came to his work. Right away he noticed that the swing set leaned to one side. “We can fix it,” he said, “but we have to get it straight first.” After watching several of us try to push it into place without any success, he took some rope, tied one end to the top of the swing set and the other to the bumper of his car. He then pushed on the accelerator and pulled until the swing set was straight up and down. As he used the car to hold it steady, we screwed the braces on and it has been perfectly aligned ever since. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Just a year or so earlier, I had watched him use the same technique to straighten up a windmill that was part of a minigolf set that he had restored and put in his backyard to his grandchildren to play. For him, you couldn’t move ahead until you pulled out the level and made sure things were straight.

Before levels were invented, people used a string with a lead weight at the end, called a plumb line, to do the same thing. In this morning’s reading from Amos, God says, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” Amos was not a professional prophet. Amos was a herdsman, a farmer, and a hewer of sycamore trees. He was a guy who worked with his hands and would have understood the plumb line metaphor right away. God was telling the people of Israel to straighten up, using a plumb line as to make sure it was right. While you can learn more about God’s plumb line through Amos and the other prophets, you can also see it described in this morning’s psalm. God’s plumb line is about practicing justice, saving the weak and the orphan; defending the humble and

needy; rescuing the weak and the poor; and delivering them from the power of the wicked. God's plumb line is about love. God's plumb line is also about mercy and grace.

Mercy and grace are intimately tied together. They are similar, complementary, but also different. Mercy is not receiving something negative that is deserved. Grace is receiving something good that is not deserved. Mercy is not receiving punishment or otherwise suffering the consequences for something we did. Grace is about receiving blessings and gifts for which we did nothing. The way I just described them shows that we usually think of mercy and grace as something we receive. In today's readings, however, God asks us to give them to others.

This is the theme of the parable of the Good Samaritan. You all know the story. A man is beaten up and left at the side of the road. A priest and a Levite walk right past, on the other side of the road, while a Samaritan – a member of a group rejected and considered unclean by Jewish society – helps him out. It is important to understand that the priest and the Levite were not wrong in what they did. They were obeying Jewish law. If they had touched the man, they would have been made unclean and would have been unable to do their jobs. Think about a surgeon whose hands need to remain sterilized to do surgery. The priest and Levite may have been on their way to minister to hundreds of people. For them, it was a case of the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the one. They were following the rules. They obeyed the law but they missed the love underneath. The priest and the Levite did what was correct and required. The Samaritan took it to the next level. He moved from following a religion based on rules to modeling a religion based on relationship

The command to love our neighbor sounds straightforward until we start asking who our neighbor actually is. It is in response to this question that Jesus tells the story of the Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, and how they handled the man at the side of the road. When he was done, Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

How do we love our neighbor as ourselves? By showing mercy and grace. By not making someone suffer consequences that we might think they deserve. By giving them something that they didn't earn.

Early this year, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington created considerable controversy by speaking directly to the president in her inauguration day sermon. What did she do? She asked him to have mercy. Today, Jesus is asking the same thing of us.

Like the priest and the Levite, we all have good and even faithful religious reasons to keep our heads down, do our jobs and continue through our daily lives as if nothing is going on and nothing we might do could make a difference. Sometimes, it takes a Samaritan, someone from outside the system – even someone our society says is unclean – to show us that we could do something more. This week – despite all the ill will and prejudice recently sent its way -- Mexico sent teams of first responders to Texas to help victims of the flood. The Mexican firefighters could have easily stayed at home. They chose to come here and help instead. After telling the story of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, Jesus asked “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” May we hear those words and go and do likewise ourselves.