

"Christian Standards"

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University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

We do not know much about the prophet Amos, other than his own admission to being a laborer: a herdsman and a “dresser of sycamore trees.” He is the earliest of all the prophets and sets a standard by which all the prophets who follow are compared. It is after the kingdom of Israel had split, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. It is a time of relative peace, but history tells us that it was quickly coming to an end. Following Amos’ prophecies, the northern kingdom falls under the military might of the Assyrian Empire. As with most prophets, his visions become mirrors in which we can see ourselves as we truly are: complex and conflicted people. What we are going to hear today is the third of four visions.

The first chapters are a litany of transgressions by the cities of the northern kingdom of Israel, and why they should be destroyed. The first vision is of the Lord forming a swarm of locusts to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel which is described as “too small,” but Amos successfully intercedes, and the Lord’s mind is changed. Amos’ second vision is also of destruction: a fire that devours the “great deep”, the waters under the earth, and then begins to burn up the land. And once again, Amos intercedes claiming the people are so small, so weak, that this is somehow unfair. And finally the third vision comes, but it is not quite so clear. It is not a vision of destruction, but an image of the Lord checking to see if his creation measures up.

Amos 7.7-17 (NRSV)

⁷This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And 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; I will never again pass them by; ⁹the 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.”

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, “O

seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” ¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy

to my people Israel.’¹⁶“Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.”¹⁷Therefore thus

says the Lord: ‘Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you

yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”

The plumb line is vital to a mason or anyone building a wall. If the wall is not straight, if its center of gravity is even a tiny bit off, it will be unstable and fall. The answer to whether the Lord’s creation measures up is a most definite: No. Though it is a time of relative peace, though some believe it may have even been a time of prosperity, Amos lifts up the fact that any prosperity being enjoyed has been crafted on the backs of the poor. His fourth vision directly castigates the wealthy: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land.” It is a call to take a good hard look at ourselves, to take stock of our priorities, and a warning against our excesses.

Our text from the Gospel according to Luke has a similar tone, but comes at us from another direction. Jesus’ parable of the “Good Samaritan” is well known. We even have laws on our books named after this very Christian parable. But what is so often overlooked is that Jesus is telling this story to a scribe, or an expert in the Jewish law. This story is scandalous to first century Jewish ears, and takes our call from God to love to the breaking point. The central character is a man who has been robbed and beaten and left for dead on the road leading down from Jerusalem into Jericho. We do not know his race, religion, or socio-economic identity. Is he rich or poor? Is he Jewish or something else? The typical human response is to assume the man is like those of us hearing the story: for the Jewish lawyer and those listening, they might presume he is Jewish; for those of us listening, we might presume him to be like us. The road he is on was notoriously dangerous, descending over 3,000 feet in 17 miles and was littered with nooks and crannies for robbers to hide. The twist in the story is that the third person to pass by the man is a Samaritan, hated by the Jews, descendants of the mixed marriages between the Jewish people of the northern kingdom of Israel and the Assyrian settlers that eventually would come. In using a Samaritan in this story, Jesus challenges the boundaries of his hearers. And in knowing that the southern Jews hated the mix-breed Samaritans, the story takes on a whole new meaning.

Luke 10.25-37 (NRSV)

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "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." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied,

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having

poured oil and wine on them.

Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Consider this story in a different light. Consider the man on the side of the road to be like us, a U.S. citizen. He is on highway 86 outside Tucson, Arizona, a road filled with Border Patrol agents. Several pass by, but they are so focused on looking for undocumented immigrants, they don't notice the man laying on the side of the road in despair, or they notice but don't stop. Several others pass by but none stop. And then a Mexican sees him, takes pity on him, cares for his wounds, and then carries him into Tucson, saving his life. And then Jesus asks, "Which of these was a neighbor?"

This parable is more than just about "being nice" or even compassionate. It is about how we look at the "other" in our lives, whether that other speaks a different language, has different colored skin, or wears clothes that are unfamiliar to us. It is about how we love and with whom we choose to share that love. This is the plumb line by which we are already being judged as Christians. Let's face it, Christianity does not hold the influence it once did in this country or around the world. For too long we have allowed prejudice and hate to be perpetuated in the name of Jesus Christ. We have allowed those who do not represent the Way of Jesus to speak boldly and belligerently about a false-religion guised as Christianity, preaching hate and prejudice against anyone who dares to disagree with them. The scenario can be changed to a certain man, on a road, two leaders recognized by the people listening. The priest and Levite could be two mainline protestant Christians walk by, and then an atheist comes along and takes pity on the man. Who was the neighbor?

How about two middle aged men walk by, and then a young teenage girl comes along, sees the man, and immediately begins to tend to his wounds. Let's assume the man is white. A policeman, or a community leader, a pastor or priest, pass by and avoid the situation because they just don't want to get involved (as you imagine that in your mind, what color skin do these leaders have?). And then a 17-year black kid wearing a hoodie sees the man, takes pity on him, and steps in to help. Who is our neighbor?

It is hard for me to hear this story and not consider what happened this past week with the acquittal of George Zimmerman after he shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The situation is complicated by the fact that Zimmerman had a history of violence, but Trayvon was no saint either. Not only are there racial issues, but it all happened in a gated community, so we might consider socio-economic profiling here as well—questions about who belongs here.

The story of the Good Samaritan teaches us not just to be nice, but how we ought to view the stranger among us. It teaches us that our first instinct should not be to avoid, but to reach out in love and compassion rather than fear. It teaches us that we are not just called to go and act lovingly to our neighbor, but to go and become a neighbor, especially to those in need, no matter how different they may be from us.

I imagine Samaritans were not treated kindly around Jerusalem. I imagine they were probably taunted and actively abused in some way. Maybe some folk even yelled out from their caravans, "Go home! We don't want you here!"—whether or not Jerusalem or one of the surrounding towns was their home. The parable of the Good Samaritan challenges our assumptions about other people. When we see a homeless person, how do we react? And how does Jesus teach us to respond? When we see two LDS missionary youth walking or riding their bikes, with their white shirts and dark ties, and their distinct yet plain LDS name badges, how does Jesus demand we respond? How straight do we stand against God's plumb line in Amos' vision when it comes to how we see God's children, people look, act, or dress different from us? Who do we consider our neighbor?

The last chapter of the book of Amos' prophecies shares God's vision, the vision shared through Jesus: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? . . . I will command , and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, and no pebble shall fall to the ground. . . . On that day I will raise up the both of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the Lord who does this. The time is surely coming . . . [when] the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it."

There is hope. God is not done with us yet. The vision has been cast. Our lives have been called. We must step out in trust rather than fear. We must step in and live in the world of which we dream, rather than the one we see, and see every person as a child of God, worthy of our compassion, and as partners in making the world a better place for us, our children, and our children's children. We cannot look to others, nor can we expect to control their behavior, we can only control our own. So it must start with each of us making the conscious decision to live as neighbors and seek to be neighbors. This is our standard, our guiding principle, our ethic and our morality. To realize God's kingdom in every step we take, this is our call.