

The Price of Words, the Value of Actions

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Amos 7:7-17, Psalm 82, Colossians

Dear friends: I included all the texts here at the beginning because I think they are important to what God is telling us today. I hope you read them!

Amos 7:7-17

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And 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; the 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." Then 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. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore 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.'"

Psalm 82

God sits in council, holding judgment in the midst of the gods:

“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?”

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;

maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;

deliver them from the power of the wicked.”

Rulers drunk with power have neither knowledge nor understanding,

they walk in darkness; the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;

nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

Luke 10:25-37

Jesus sent 70 of his disciples ahead of him and gave them authority to do as he did. They returned rejoicing that his power was present in them.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He 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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. The 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.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

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Our Gospel today is the beautiful and beloved story commonly called, “The Good Samaritan.” So why would I talk about Amos? Of course I don’t want to talk about Amos. Who would? He’s this cranky guy who’s been yanked out of his quiet life tending sheep somewhere in the next *country* and *ordered* to bring the worst possible news to a popular king: “Your country’s going to get destroyed, your people slaughtered, your women violated. And it’s your own fault for trampling on people who are poor. Don’t blame me, I’m just the messenger.” (So if I talk about Amos, I’m the messenger, right?) I was going to leave it out of the service entirely, but a little voice told me I couldn’t. I’m just hoping it was the voice of God, fingers crossed. Because Amos is a truth teller.

There’s a price for telling the truth, then and now. Actually, *then* wasn’t that different than *now*. We think we invented checks and balances, right? Israel had prophets, priests, and kings—almost the same thing. Kings spoke and their words were law. Priests *could* be like judges, interpreting the law and *checking* the king’s power. Which was fine until the priests ended up in the king’s pocket. Building up the royal treasury, taking their cut, milking the poor. Prophets were supposed to balance the power of established church and state, but even prophets could be co-opted, working in “stables” as yes-people to the king. (It’s a little more complicated, but I’m breaking it down.) Then God would send in prophets from outside like Amos, pointing out the obvious, as Amos does: “Look around! The rich are getting richer and the poor are...well,

they're getting stiffed. Once again. Not God's law. Not God's will. Not God's way," Amos tells them. "There are consequences. Just sayin'." His warnings really irritated Amaziah the priest, who ran crying to his boss, King Jeroboam. Amos says, "Hey, I didn't ask for this job. All I really want to do is go back and take care of my sheep. But I keep getting these darn visions."

In this vision, Amos refers four times to God holding something we never hear about elsewhere in the Bible. We don't know exactly what it was but most people translate it as "plumbline."

Who knows what a plumbline is? It's a string with a weight on the end. Carpenters use it to see if a wall is straight, to bring the wall into alignment, to "true" the wall. Yes, true can be a verb.



It reminded me of my impressionable youth. One family vacation we went to the Black Hills and fell into the tourist trap known as the "Cosmos Mystery Area." Anyone been there? It's advertised as a place where the laws of nature are suspended, where you can walk up walls, where water flows uphill, and short people look taller than tall ones. Mostly, it's constructed as a 3-D optical illusion. The walls inside *look* perpendicular but they're really built on a slant so you *feel* like you're standing crooked. They warn people with balance issues and weak stomachs to stay out. If you brought a plumbline in it would seem to hang sideways. But you can't fool the law of gravity. And you can't fool the law of God. Or of truth. There are consequences when you try. One way or another, things have to be brought back into true.

Seems to me these days we're kind of collectively stuck in a spiritual, moral, and ethical "Cosmos Mystery Area." But look beyond the illusion: What's true and what's a lie? There seems to be some disagreement on this point. God's will may be distorted, but God's justice cannot be mocked. Truth will have its say.

And the psalmist defines justice: God says, "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the power of the wicked." If I may just confuse you with a few facts: In 1990, the richest 10% in this country had 60% of the wealth. The bottom 50% owned only 3.7%. At the end of 2021, the top 10% owned 70% of the wealth and the bottom half only 2.6%.¹ And even what the lowliest have is so much better than what much of the rest of the world has that people die trying to get here. Hang your plumbline on that, Amos!

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/299460/distribution-of-wealth-in-the-united-states/>. Retrieved 7/9/2022. Add to those statistics this: In the U.S. in 2014, 49% percent of women who had an abortion lived below the poverty line, with another 26% very close to poverty (*NY Times*, December 2021).



That's the hard truth today. So what about the gospel, the good news? Today it's the parable of the Good Samaritan. We all know it, more or less, right? The question is, Who is my neighbor? The poor lonely traveler is mugged, robbed, left for dead. The holy people, the religious professionals, stay far away, because if they touch that possibly dead body, they won't be permitted to perform their professional duties. But who does stop? The Samaritan, who goes down in history as the nice guy. Only the people Jesus was talking to didn't see Samaritans that way. Jews considered Samaritan religion as a corruption of the true faith. Jews wouldn't eat with them, or even speak with them. But Jesus did. He made an untouchable the hero of the story, the neighbor. Do you know how many works of art have been produced around this parable? I chose the one you're looking at for its incredible intimacy, which is amazing when you realize that under other circumstances, the wounded man might have shunned his savior.

When a lifelong church member told this story from memory, he didn't name the helpful guy as a Samaritan. In his version, *Jesus* stopped and cared. At first I laughed, but then I realized it's kind of true on both counts. Jesus is the one who dares to touch us when we're unclean. And Jesus was also the one who was hated and feared so much he got killed. For touching the untouchable. For saying the unsayable. For pointing out the rot in the rosy-looking apple. The parable says that the value of our religion is measured not just in words, in what we profess, but in deeds, in what we practice. The parable was a plumbline exposing the problem with Jewish practice at the time: not that it was untrue, but that it was *out of true* with its own ideals.

What does it say for us? Have we gone out of true, too? Yes, if we forget that we're often the one in the ditch, needing help from those we seem to consider beneath us: people we relied on to deliver our food or provide essential frontline services during the early pandemic; the immigrant laborers who grow, harvest, and process our food. We let those "neighbors" bear the covid exposure we didn't want to face, right? Theirs were the dirty hands stretched out to help us in a time of need, that we find too dirty to touch. We literally leave them to die by the side of the road, suffocating in a truck.



So how do we face our own misalignment with the faith we profess? Our problems are not individual problems as much as group issues, so I think we have to do it together. Let me tell you a true story, about trueing and truth. A young man found his way to the church I served in Chicago, which was mostly Black people living in poverty. He was smart and educated but afflicted with a mental illness for which he needed daily medication. At Holy Family Church, as we do here, joys

and concerns were shared aloud. Every few months, Jesse would start his prayer like this: “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” and go on: “Smite the wicked today! Bring down upon them the fire of your wrath, destroy them utterly from the face of the earth!” No reason given. In some situations, we might have thought he was a modern-day Amos, but the wise women of the congregation knew better. He was out of true with himself. After the service that day, they would confer: “Yes, it sounds like Jesse’s off his meds again. Time to have a little talk with him.” And they would, and Jesse would do better. Sternness joined kindness, understanding joined truth at the right time and brought him back to himself. Can we imitate their tactics on a larger scale?

We who self-identify as Christians need to look at ourselves and our society with the plumbline of God’s truth. Amos is also the prophet who said, “Let justice roll down like rivers, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” This was famously repeated by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: not rich, not a legislator, not a judge, but surely a prophet for our time.

Once again today, I want us to end this part of the service with silent prayer. Wipe your mind clear of your usual prayer requests, and wait in patience for God to speak to you. Breathe in: Your justice. Breathe out: Your truth.

Prayers

Heavenly One, bend down to earth to hear your children’s cries. Teach us your way of justice, bring us back to true faith and trust. You give us everything, even life itself; help us give just a little bit of what we have.

We pray for the families of those who have been murdered by the insanity of gun violence, the loved ones of those left in a truck to die, the relatives of those buried alive in the earthquake in Afghanistan; the friends and comrades of those who have died in war this week. Teach us your way of peace. Help us to reach out with tender hands and the strength of our convictions to those far and near. Remember us when you come into your own, and teach us always to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...