

## **Is there a plumbline in the house?**

Based on Amos 7: 7-17 and Luke 10: 25-37

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The Lord is standing beside a wall built with a plumbline, holding a plumbline, when he asks the prophet what do you see and the prophet answers, "...a plumbline?" I think this is something that builders still use, though there's probably an app for that now. For those of us not in construction, a plumbline is basically a weight on a string. Gravity being what it is, if you hold up the free end of the string, the weight will ensure that the string is a straight vertical line, perpendicular to the ground beneath your feet. It's to show the builder a straight line, a sort of vertical level, the standard by which you can see, *this is up*. This is straight, this is true. A standard, more importantly against which to judge—this wall we're building is straight, or it isn't—it's stable or it isn't.

In Amos's prophecy, when it comes to the actions of Israel's king, the building that is the king's reign, the plumbline apparently shows just how crooked is that building. We're not told that, interestingly. In fact in the vision the Lord stands before "a wall built with a plumbline, holding a plumbline." So the wall in the vision is apparently plumb—straight, stable.

But the priest doesn't appreciate Amos's vision, doesn't want to see either a straight wall or the straight line drawn by the string and the stone. So we get the point that the plumbline makes the authorities look bad. Because when we are oriented to what is straight, to which way is up, what is crooked looks, well, really crooked. And maybe more than crooked—it looks broken and wrong and in need of being torn down.

According to Amos, God is ready to destroy Israel because they are crooked. That might seem very harsh. But the fact is that if a building is crooked, that building is likely to fall down and to kill people in the process. Better that the wall or the building be destroyed than that it become the destroyer of human lives. Better, the Lord must be thinking, to reduce them to stones again, to start again, than to have them end buried under their own faulty building. Let them start building all over again--with a plumbline this time. Let them build something that can shelter, that can protect, that can stand.

It strikes me in writing this sermon how many of the words we use to describe a perfect right angle, a perfect vertical line, also have a moral meaning. The word “right” for example, as in right angle or as in righteousness. The word “true” as in truth, but also as in a line that is straight. It’s a metaphor built into our language, so to speak—because our ancestors saw the process of building a good community as akin to the process of building.

And if it is dangerous to build without regard to what is straight, to what is good, then we surely must ask ourselves, what is our plumbline? How can we tell if what we are building, in our lives, in our church and community and nation, how can we tell if what we are building is true, if it is stable and safe and right?

One way we can tell if something is truly good if it has loving effects. If it heals, lifts up, binds up wounds, protects people who were vulnerable. Jesus did not set out rules about what we should and should not do, about what was and was not good. He loved and he taught love.

In the Middle Ages, the story of the Good Samaritan was read as an allegory. That is, every element in the story was seen as standing for something else, in a neat, one-to-one correspondence. St Augustine has a very detailed commentary on it, in which the Samaritan stands for Jesus, and the man who was attacked by thieves is humankind. The thieves are sin, I think, or minions of Satan, and the Levite and the priest each stand for some group or other, but my favorite part is that the innkeeper stands for the Apostle Paul. I question the details of that interpretation, and I sincerely doubt that Jesus meant to tell a story about himself in that way, but you can see how Augustine gets there. It works, especially if you keep to the broad strokes and don’t get too far into the details—which Augustine did. The reason it works is because who Jesus was and what he said are the same thing. He healed, loved, lifted up the vulnerable, risked himself in those efforts. And he taught that doing those things was good, was the definition of good. Love God with all that you are, he emphasized, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. That’s who he was, it’s what he did, and it’s what he taught.

When we contemplate Jesus’ life and teachings, when we immerse ourselves in them, we learn that our plumbline is integrity—that what we say and what we do cohere. Ben preached two weeks ago about the fruits of the spirit not being goals to strive for, but the natural, organic produce of who we are meant to be as God’s people. What we do is who we are.

If we are not practicing integrity, then we are not properly building anything. There are those moments when we need to ask ourselves, are we trying to build something or are we just moving stones around? Stacking them up like children with blocks, hoping to watch them fall. When our favorite political slogan, bumper sticker, flag includes an obscenity or a code for an obscenity, then let's just say out loud, we are not building anything with those slogans. We are simply throwing stones.

Simple example—water bottles. Many of you know that I have a thing about plastic water bottles. In the United States, our tap water is the best in the world. Unless you live in Flint Michigan or similarly affected communities, there is no reason in the world to buy water. But there are many reasons not to do so, starting with the plastic filling up our landfills, and moving to the gasoline required and pollution created to transport those water bottles from who knows where—The Rocky Mountains? Fiji?--to our local stores and from there to our homes. We spend this energy to package and transport water that is virtually identical to the perfectly clean, potable water that conveniently comes right out of the faucet.

Now. We as the church could buy cases of bottled water at Walmart or Shoprite and sell them for a buck a piece, at least, at Jazz Vespers and the fall festival. And we would make money. Not millions, but money. And that money could pay for all kinds of things—school supplies, building repairs, groceries for the Food Closet. But does that make sense? Because while we're making the world a better place over here with the money, we're defacing it with the bottles and the carbon footprint over there. It's not so much like building a house on sand so much as it is trying to build a house with sand. We're just not going to get anywhere that way.

I'm not really telling you all that just to convince you about not buying bottled water. Though if that works, I'd be glad. But I'm hoping it's an example that the things we use for building blocks are going to determine the stability of our building, or the lack thereof.

When we are looking for a plumbline amid the chaos, we have moments when we come across something deeply true. A person, a story like the story of the Good Samaritan, a moment when a person or a community put aside self-interest, and acted in love, practicing what they preach, showing us what integrity looks like, what it looks like, simply to do the right thing. Remember the moment when Ukraine's president, Vlodymyr Zelensky refused transport out of his country, when he didn't so much decide as assume that he would be staying with his people,

putting himself and his family at risk in solidarity. That moment raised our standards of what a leader is and does; we needed that.

We still celebrate the moment when Rosa Parks, told to give up her seat at the front of the bus, refused. People later tried to diminish her courage, saying, she was just too tired to move. “I was tired,” she recalled, “tired of Jim Crow.” There’s a t-shirt these days that says simply, “Nah,” in quotation marks, and then “Rosa Parks.” That “nah” was courageous, it took her to jail, and it started a movement that in the end brought down segregation. Sometimes “nah” is the pure and righteous truth.

I have my own plumbline memories, moments I return to that restore my faith in humanity and in God. Moments that remind me that it is possible to be better, to do the right thing, to make a difference in someone else’s life. Scenes from the Food Closet’s Friday distributions or past Back-to-School Fairs or the Spring Festival, when we built relationships with our neighbors, or moments when my family was in crisis and a social worker, or a church member, stepped up with a word or a gesture that lifted our burden and loved my kids. I know you have these plumbline moments too, and I urge you to revisit them regularly. When we experience what is good and true, we should contemplate it, let it change us, let it raise our standards, not so much for others, but let it raise our standards for ourselves and for our own communities.

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Thess, “hold fast to what is good.” There’s a lot out there that’s confusing, that’s deceptive, that’s mean but looks smart, or cruel but seems funny. When we feel overwhelmed, when the thought crosses our minds, *can this be ok?* Then we are called to return to what we know is good. We are called to hold fast to these moments when we know that good happened, that loving integrity happened. Hold fast to the teaching that we must love God and neighbor, and to the story of the Good Samaritan, in which one person puts his own health and safety at risk for a stranger, puts his own resources on the line, for someone who may even be his enemy. This is our plumbline, our standard, our straight edge. This is what good looks like; it looks like Jesus.