

## ***When Things are Left Askew***

Amos 7:7-15

Let me begin by saying, I've got some good news, as well as some not so good news, at least as life pertains to the Hayes and Windsor households. We have finally found a buyer for the 13-acre farm where Wendy's parents lived for 33 years, and the closing should take place by the end of this week! This property has been on the market since last September when we moved Henry and Charlotte down to Mystic in order to take care of them in their elder years. Needless to say, we're delighted to finally arrive at a point of sale and not have this house, barn, outbuildings and acreage to manage anymore. A gentleman farmer I am not (some would say, at this point, I'm not even a gentleman!).

The bad news, however, is that we have had to sell the property for pennies on the dollar relative to its assessed and initial market value. I recognize few sellers ever get their asking price, however, we've had a much different experience than the average homeowner. You see, we've discovered along the way that this 1823 farmhouse is not the house we thought it to be. After a number of structural inspections, it was determined that the house was a bit askew. The second floor had actually dropped an inch or two, evidenced by unseen cracks hidden behind the wallpaper, as well as doorways and windows out of alignment, requiring us to have the interior structure jacked up at no small expense. But then, we found that the entire south wall of the house (faced with a veneer of homemade bricks formed from clay from the pond out back) had disintegrated over time, creating a noticeable bow to the entire side of the house. These

homemade bricks were also used in the foundation of the house, which we discovered was also disintegrating far more than we ever noticed—now requiring the pouring of an entirely new foundation. If that wasn't enough, we were told the roof was no longer supported sufficiently by the weight-bearing walls, thus, the entire roof had to be replaced and the external walls of the house shored up.

What was discovered to be askew and out of plumb was more than merely a single floor. It was the entire edifice, leading one contractor to conclude it would be cheaper to raze it than restore it. Without significant and extremely costly structural repair, this beautiful and charming antique home would just come tumbling down like Jericho's walls. What we initially thought was a valuable piece of property has now come to be worth little more than the land it was sitting on.

Needless to say, with news like this, we were in utter despair, fearing everything we'd done to spruce up the house for sale was lost, and then some. This appeared to be the case until a savvy buyer with a contractor or two in the family stepped up and decided the charm and character of the house was worth it and was eager to restore it to its earlier state. We've given her a sweet deal to encourage it, with the assurance that this beloved old house will be redeemed to the way it once was.

As you might imagine, over the past several months, Wendy and I have wrestled with regret over what's transpired and what should have done to address it years ago. But, regrets aside, I've also pondered the ways this experience serves as a morality tale for so many matters in life when they are not addressed properly or in a

timely manner, with consequences and problems that invariably result, sometimes with utter devastation.

This goes well beyond the responsibilities of home ownership. It also pertains to our personal health and wellbeing; if we put off taking care of ourselves, if we don't get treatment when we should, it usually turns into a much bigger concern for us down the road. This same logic applies to social injustices in society when they're not reckoned with, as we've seen so clearly in recent months in regard to racism and the vestiges of bigotry.

The same thing occurs when we don't manage finances appropriately or prudently—eventually it will all catch up with us. And then, in a significant way, it also holds true in interpersonal relationships that risk becoming broken and irreparable if problems between people are not addressed. Namely, if things are left askew in relationships, if brokenness is ignored or understated, like a deteriorating building, the entire framework is affected, if not jeopardized: undue stresses occur at pressure points; the load of responsibility is shifted unequally, with heavier burdens for some to bear than others.

When things are out of synch, it creates distorted views of what is going on, who is right, and what one sees and how one perceives it; few things are square or on the level, leaving each part weakened and vulnerable, unable to trust the fundamental integrity of the place one calls home. Once that happens, it doesn't matter how you appear to the outside world; inside you can be falling apart. It can happen to anyone along the course of life.

For me, it's poignant that one of the more notable images in prophetic biblical literature is the symbol of the plumb line, as we have it here in Amos. Most of us are likely familiar with a plumb-bob, or plummet, which is attached to a string that becomes a plumb-line, or vertical reference, to measure how straight a structure is. It's used to determine how close to plumb a measurement is or, conversely, how far askew things have come. Down through the ages, builders used it to determine the vertical straightness of a wall or corner post, as well as to determine the center of gravity and the angles of a structure relative to it. You can go into most cathedrals today, for instance, and note the brass datum mark inlaid into the floors indicating the center of gravity where the plumb-line would fall, which was to aid in the construction of domes or spires.

The use of this imagery in Amos is interesting, in that the plumb line here was meant as a reference point to measure how far askew Israel had become morally and ethically from their original covenant vision and vows. This is a particularly fascinating given that, at the time, Israel was near its post-Davidic zenith under the rule of Jeroboam II, who ruled the dominant northern kingdom of Israel, while King Uzziah ruled the much smaller southern realm of Judah. In both settings in 750 BCE, this was a very prosperous time. The rich were getting richer, Israel was expanding its territory; it was militarily strong and relatively powerful in the region. Everything seemed to be as good as it could possibly be.

Yet, while every other priest and prophet was championing kingdom pride and glory, Amos brought forth a stinging rebuke of Israel's outlook and complacency. Beneath the glorious façade, the

internal structure was crumbling. The moral integrity of their nation was disintegrating: the gap between the rich and the poor was immense and inhumane, military might and the destruction of enemies were lionized; courts, both civil and religious, glossed over social injustices and failed to honor the covenant obligations to protect those with the least status and those who were most vulnerable in society. Though all the metrics of economic and political greatness were there and were impressive for the time, it was built upon the backs of the poor and foreigners who came their to find work, upon their neighbors who suffered needlessly from Israel's territorial ambitions, and upon those who had no voice, protection, or value in society. It was a world that (even back then) catered to the proverbial "one percent" in power and privilege. It's world not unlike ours which, as Pope Francis noted yesterday, is one that sacrifices human lives on the altar of money and profit!

Since Amos was the sole truth-teller warning about these crimes against God and humanity, it was convenient for the political and religious leadership to brand him as a traitor to Israel, undermining his public credibility, which is why our text has Amaziah, the chief priest, being dispatched to confront Amos to banish him from Israel:

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.

You and I know, that's what powerful people do when they don't want the truth to be told. The general public doesn't really care—they usually drink the Koolaid of the king, swallowing the propaganda of the official line. So it was fairly easy to dismiss the divine messenger, the truth-teller, because clearly he's an anomaly—a cranky outlier

who found fault with everything. Amos wants to fix what doesn't need fixing! Or so it seemed.

That, of course, was the utter foolishness of denial and shortsightedness. As we know, this isn't an ancient folly—we live with the consequences of it every day in our world. Denial deludes people into thinking that, as long as everything appears fine on the surface, there's no need to address the warnings that beckon for attention and immediate action. Ahh...but then, why worry? It's easier to pass it onto someone else, right? As they say, "Don't trouble trouble until trouble troubles you!"

The truth is, whether we're talking about societal issues or environmental destruction or racial problems and injustices, or relational issues in our marriages, friendships, or family—over and over again we allow ourselves to be deluded into thinking everything is fine and doesn't need fixing. Most people prefer comfort over conflict, convenience over complication, which is why it's easy to ignore trouble. So we don't talk about it, we don't investigate to see if there's any truth to the warnings or complaints, we resist having to change ourselves or our lifestyles or the situations that bring grief to others. As long as it's covered up or never talked about, it doesn't really exist, does it—so we don't have to deal with it. It's not part of our reality when we don't acknowledge what's lying below the surface of our lives.

This gets even more perverse when religion is used as a means to cover-up pain, invoking God to be a co-conspirator in our avoidance of reckoning with critical issues ("Save me, Lord, from all my problems!")? Instead of a source of guidance and correction, faith

becomes a coping device, a crutch even, where spirituality is used to treat the symptoms of our distress. Or religion can serve as a distraction from what's really going on. It's not hard to be like Jeroboam's priests, smoothing things over with spiritual pablum and pious clichés—"This is God's will," or "God will forgive," or "The Lord will make things right..." without any intention of taking meaningful action ourselves to address the core issues that are creating the problems or undermining relationships.

Yet, the real answer to prayer comes when God sends prophets like Amos into our lives to wake us up to reality and get us past the obstructive denial that prevents us from seeing what's really going on.

The reason Amos comes knocking on our doors is to help us to address what's wrong in life before it mushrooms into something bigger than it should or more than we can handle. Amos doesn't come with a can of paint in hand or a roll of wallpaper. He doesn't arrive with anything that will hide the cracks or smooth things over.

Instead, Amos comes with a plumb-line to help us realize how askew things have come to be; he comes to help us reckon with core values and certain elements of our lives that are out of whack and need to be addressed. Amos pricks our consciences with a reality check: "Thus says the Lord, it's time to get well! Fix the problems, before disaster strikes!" He speaks the truth in settings where we are used to cleaning up after the proverbial elephant. As that old line goes, Amos comes to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

So what do we do when Amos comes knocking? We can choose to avoid the pain by ignoring it, or we can address it in order to begin

the process of healing. It's pretty much one or the other. Amos won't make the decision for us; it's ours to own, as is the remedy we need. But if we deal with what is wrong while things are still repairable and more easily addressed, we will avoid the day when, to everyone's utter surprise, everything comes tumbling down—a crisis moment that could rob anyone of hope for recovery or relief.

Friends, however we choose to apply the wisdom of this message is up to us, not only in our personal wellbeing as individuals—or in our family, our marriage, our business relationships and friendships—but also as citizens that want to believe our nation can be great. So it's good to do a little soul-searching from time to time. What things are askew when measured against what we could be or wish to be? What problems are we avoiding or ignoring? What conversations need to take place, and between whom? What remedies should be embraced and pursued in order to secure a better future, or to overcome a troubling past? What help is warranted to move us forward in repairing what's wrong below the surface before we start rebuilding for the future?

These are the real questions that matter to us in our lives—about the stuff that lies below the surface and all appearances. When things are simply left askew, we risk more than we know. May we have the wisdom, courage, dedication, and hope that we can do this effectively and well, so that we will prevent the worst from happening and redeem the best that every life brings.

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