

“A Time to Speak. A Time to Act”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Amos 7:7-9 (10-17); Luke 10:25-37

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“I’m just a…” Have you ever spoken that phrase, perhaps to mask a fear of failure, or disqualify yourself from a request? “I’m just a housewife,” was common several decades ago. “I’m just a working person.” “I’m just an assistant pastor.” “I’m just an elder.” “I’m just a student, an intern.” “I’m just a …” Well, Amos offers a similar reply to a priest named Amaziah who is not fond of Amos’ prophecy. In fact he’d prefer the prophet would pack his bags and head south to Judah offer God’s tough words of judgment.

In a portion of Amos 7 we will not be reading, Amos tells the priest, “I am not a prophet by profession. I’m just a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.” Now as a side note, this is not the same tree as our American Sycamore. In the Middle East, this tree was also known as a mulberry fig, and bore a fruit that needed to be cut open a bit, just before it ripened. That’s who Amos was, just a dresser of the mulberry-fig; that is, before being called by God to be a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, speaking against both palace and temple.

Our three verse lesson contains the third of four object lessons God uses with Amos. The first two were locusts and fire that God was going to send down on the people for their injustice. In both cases, Amos intervened and God relented. But as God continues to play show and tell with Amos, the judgment is more severe and definite.

Amos writes, “The Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’” This is as much a statement as a question, for in writing of it, Amos is saying, “This is what God made me see.”

Let us listen to what God is showing Amos and us in Amos 7:7-9:

*This is what God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand.*

**‘Amos, what do you see?’**

*‘A plumb-line.’*

**‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; <sup>9</sup> 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 King Jeroboam with the sword.’**

The parable was a common method for teaching God’s ways and laws, and we know Jesus employed it often, and Luke includes more than the other gospel writers. Our lesson is one of the most familiar parables in the Scriptures. As Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, who helped a beaten man on the roadside, he does not quote any specific law of Moses, but he will, in essence redefine and expand the accepted definition of neighbor.

Luke’s placement of the parable is intriguing. The gospel writer has just reported how Jesus sent 72 of his followers, in pairs, on a missionary journey, a kind of summer internship to test out what he had taught them about teaching and healing and praying. They have just returned, excited, bubbling over with stories to share with Jesus and each other.

Seemingly abruptly, Luke interjects, “Just then – just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.” My goodness, timing is everything, and some people seem unable to grasp what is appropriate when. Jesus is having a homecoming party and this man “Just then’s” his way in with his agenda. It is like having a wedding or baby shower, or simply a casual gathering of friends, and “just then” one of your guests asks, “What do you think about climate change? Or Black Lives Matter? Or the Brexit vote? Or the extension of troop deployment in Afghanistan?”

Well, Jesus does not brush off the lawyer, who, while there to test Jesus, still addresses him with the respectful title of teacher. The questions asked could be to test Jesus’ knowledge of the law or his faithfulness to it, or both, but as Jesus commonly does, he will respond to the lawyer’s initial question his own question, “What does the law say?”

With that, we shift our eyes back and forth, and wonder if the lawyer is testing Jesus, or Jesus the lawyer. As we hear the lawyer probe deeper, asking a second question to justify himself, Jesus masterfully tells the parable to redefine what it means to be a neighbor to another. It is in a sense a “gotcha” parable, which we enjoy hearing when it embarrasses those with whom we disagree, politically or theologically. But Jesus’ words are meant to teach, not “gotcha,” the lawyer, nor we who hear the parable centuries later.

Let us hear the parable about a man of compassion, the one we have come to call the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37:

*Just then I, a lawyer, stood up to test Jesus. I asked him,  
“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

***“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”***

*“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.”*

***“You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”***

*But wanting to justify myself, I asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

***“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?”***

*“The one who showed him mercy.”*

***“Go and do likewise.”***

As was well documented this week, in our era of cell phone video and surveillance cameras, there is little that takes place in public that is not recorded. Considering our parable, imagine if the beating of the man on the fast descending, sharp turned road from Jerusalem to Jericho had been caught on someone's smart phone. I, for one, would seek to see that priest and Levite moving to the other side of the road as they passed the man who had been beaten. What expression was on their faces? Did they even look, or were their eyes fixed forward as they hummed, "Walk on by"?

We live in an era where news is constant, and fast, inviting us to want to know now. When tragedies strike, particularly those generated by human action, we grasp for quick answers, often before they are verified as facts. I wonder if there is so much going on, so many tragedies, we can only focus on one for a short time, before we move on to the next. As Matt Crane and I pondered this week, "How long ago was Orlando?" It was four weeks ago.

As I studied the Good Samaritan parable again, I was reminded of how often in the past, I have focused on figuring out the excuses the priest and the Levite might have offered for passing by on the other side of the road. Martin Luther King, Jr. did the same when he wrote about once riding in a car down the winding, fast descending road from Jerusalem to Jericho: "That's a dangerous road," he wrote. "In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the 'Bloody Pass.' And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure." [King, Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountain Top" sermon preached in Memphis, TN on April 3, 1968]

Today, reporters would track down the two men to ask why they walked by, perhaps catching the priest after leading worship in the temple, and the Levite at his desk job in the temple offices. I am intrigued by these two because I am fully aware I would likely have done the same. I know how easy it is to walk past a man begging on a city sidewalk, or to keep my car window rolled up, hoping the light will turn green before the homeless woman silently walks past the car with a simple sign that my forward-focused eyes refuse to read. Easier yet, is not to venture out onto such roads, thus avoiding coming face to face with the injured.

Yes, I have preached sermons on those two who walked by, speculating why they did not stop, for we are not told why in the parable; the two, who shared the race, ethnicity, and religion of the lawyer who posed the questions to Jesus. And sometimes, I now fear that such tepid preaching opened up a crack, allowed an excuse, to justify inaction. If so, it was not plumb line preaching.

Oh, we certainly uplift the Samaritan, of a race, ethnicity and religion the lawyer's class and culture would find offensive. Even more than the hated Greek and Roman occupiers, Samaritans were despised because they were more like the bad cousin bloodline of the extended family that years ago took the wrong path. I also know we can simply end up naming this man who risked helping as just a "good guy," a regular Joe who, when interviewed would say, "I just did what anyone else would do." We know that is not true.

The parable Jesus tells opens and closes around the verb, “to do.” The lawyer’s first question is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ answer sends him back to the law, and the lawyer recites what for Jesus is the great commandment to love God and love neighbor as self. Then comes the second question, “Who is my neighbor?” and the parable flows forth.

Now remember the rule of law is to never ask a question to which one does not know the answer. The lawyer knows the law, and its definition of neighbor. It means those of one’s own kind, and in Jewish law, the resident alien in one’s midst. It did not include Samaritans. Yet, as Jesus ends the parable, we realize he has changed the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” That question asked Jesus to recite a definition, a set of rules for calculating the boundaries and limits of those to whom one was obliged to help. I mean, one can’t save the whole world.

We should have seen it coming. Jesus has already talked about loving enemies and praying for those who persecute you. For me, what Jesus does is change the word “neighbor” from a noun to a verb, “to neighbor.” His question to the lawyer was, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

And in the lawyer’s reply, the “to do” verb is heard again. “The one who did mercy.” “Go and do likewise,” are Jesus’ final words to the lawyer. As Justo Gonzalez writes, Jesus is not saying, “Go and act in love to your neighbor but rather, go and become a neighbor to those in need, no matter how alien they may be.” [Gonzales, Justo, *Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010, p. 139)] We might even imagine Jesus holding up Amos’ plumb line to show how God measures what it means to be a neighbor.

When I wrote my preview for this sermon two weeks ago, I was eager to offer pearls of wisdom about a plumb line and a good Samaritan. I imagine I would have done so as one looking at both scenes from a distance, surrounded by biblical commentaries and my own notes. What I found was I was “Just then’ed” by this week’s events. I found myself on a road encountering men lying dead on a Baton Rouge sidewalk, in a car in St. Paul, on the streets of Dallas, with many more in marketplaces and shops in Iraq and Bangladesh. As the week progressed, I wondered if I was walking by the carnage, unwilling to stop to attend a peaceful protest or take the time to be part of a religious vigil.

I do not have answers to the hurt on the roadsides, and the blood in our streets. I personally think it wise not to rush to our comfortable confines of judgment. I also know all the facts are not yet known of each circumstance, but I know there is pain and death, sorrow and hurt. So, I return to our parable, where there is one fact known: without knowing the identity of the man who had been beaten, two men walked by the scene and one man stopped to help. Why? We don’t know why the Levite and priest walked by, though we tend to spend a lot of time speculating about them. We know why the Samaritan stopped. He was moved with compassion.

It seems to me Amos’ plumb line and the teaching of the parable calls us to put ourselves in positions to not just feel compassion, but to move on it, to act on it. It means going deeper, looking longer, to the point where learn names and sense fear. It means reading past headlines, and crossing our self-imposed boundaries of familiarity, wherein we only listen to and hear voices that agree with us.

He was just a Samaritan, but what a difference he made. I close with the words from Martin Luther King's last sermon, given the night before he was killed. After sharing what I read previously about the reasons the two men passed by, Dr. King offered the following comparison between them and the Samaritan:

"The first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" [King, op. cit.]

Friends, let us ask that question, and go and do likewise.