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When you're framing up a house, before you lift a stick of lumber you check the foundation to make certain its walls are plumb, level and square.

If the foundation is out of PLUMB it means the walls are leaning, and the weight of the force pressing down could cause them to collapse.

If the foundation isn't LEVEL neither will the floors be, and everything that's added will contribute to the home's instability.

If the foundation is out of SQUARE then everything on top of it will be out of square; and problems originating with the foundation will be transmitted through the entire structure to the roof.

In other words – if a home's foundation isn't plumb, level, and square, everything built on it will be put at risk, everything built on it will be in danger of failing.

And that's where our first reading takes us today.

THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SHOWED ME, says Amos.
THE LORD WAS STANDING BESIDE A WALL WITH A PLUMB LINE IN HIS HAND, and the Lord said:
SEE, I AM SETTING A PLUMB LINE IN THE MIDST OF MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.

God has a plumb line, and what does it show?

- The nation's walls are all a kilter,
- The structure from top to bottom is unsound;
- The whole enterprise is failing.

So, what's going on here?

At this point in Israel's history the economic indicators have never been better.

- For the first time in generations, the country is facing no real military threat.
- Control of crucial trade routes means businesses are amassing huge profits.
- And imported luxuries were readily available to those with means—custom homes, ivory-inlaid furniture, the hottest clothing fashions, and wines that would give the finest Columbia Valley vintages a run for their money.

The specific indictments against the upper class are cataloged elsewhere in Amos.

Chapter 2, for example, where the prophet says of the wealthy:

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals;
they trample the head of the poor into the dust and push the afflicted out of the way.

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Or Chapter 8— Hear this, you what trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?" The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Yes, something is most decidedly out of balance in Israel.
The foundation of its faith and ethics—the two pillars of the COMMANDMENTS, love of God and love of neighbor—have become wobbly.

And it's not that the people of Israel don't have enough "religion."
They had plenty of it!

- They attend worship. They sing songs.
- They see their prosperity as a sign of divine blessing.
- They look forward to "the day of the LORD'S visitation," believing God will fulfill the expectations they have both for themselves and for their country.

From the view at the TOP, all seems right with the world.

But then Amos shows up with God's plumb line in hand, and a voice that grates like fingernails on a chalkboard:

I HATE—I DESPISE YOUR FESTIVALS, says the LORD.
I TAKE NO DELIGHT IN YOUR SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES.
TAKE AWAY FROM ME THE NOISE OF YOUR SONGS;
I WILL NOT LISTEN TO THEM. BUT LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS,
AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE AN EVER-FLOWING STREAM.[1]

NO TRANSLATION IS NEEDED to interpret the warnings Amos gives for our time.

The expanding gulf between rich and poor; the institutionalization of greed; elected leaders whose BIG UGLY BILL will…

- take health coverage away from millions of Americans,
- reduce basic food assistance,
- exacerbate suffering for millions around the world,
- roll back climate initiatives,
- turbocharge the prison industry,
- and in myriad other ways punish the poor for being poor and strip the refugee, immigrant, asylum seeker, and undocumented person of their humanity.

[1] Amos 5:21-24

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To the question of whether the SCRIPTURES have anything relevant to say to us today comes the answer: LISTEN TO THE PROPHETS:

> WOE TO YOU who make unjust policies and draft oppressive legislation,
> who deprive the powerless of justice and rob poor people—my people—of their rights,
> who prey upon the widowed and rob orphans.
> What will you do on that Day of reckoning when disaster comes from far away?
> To whom will you flee for aid, and where will you bury your wealth? [2]

Make no mistake, courtesy of current policies benefits in our society will further inflate the fortunes of the ÜBER-WEALTHY while further impoverishing the poor.

But know this, says the LORD: Those who have sown the wind will reap the whirlwind!

Our texts this morning are about ECONOMICS and ETHICS.

Jesus was a carpenter. He knew how to use plumb bobs, levels, and squares. He knew how to use the tools God had given him to build community, and he knew that ushering in God's Great Economy came with risks at every level.

Today, a member of the educated elite, stands up to test Jesus with a question. WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE? he asks. [3]

On the surface it sounds like the kind of SPIRITUAL question appropriate to bring to Jesus. But digging deeper we find his question is more MATERIAL than it appears.

NT scholar Ched Myers points out that the verb Luke uses for INHERIT—*klēronomeō*—connotes material inheritance, and so the lawyer's question might better be translated:

> WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT THE GREAT ECONOMY?

Myers goes on:

> [This question] reflects a conceit typical of the ELITE, who presume salvation to be like the intergenerational transfers of wealth they enjoy.[4]

The LAWYER, says Myers, knows the answer he's looking for from Jesus.

But what he gets from Jesus instead is a story about the radical kind of neighbor-love Jesus invites all who would follow him to embody.

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[2] Isaiah 10:1-4a *The Inclusive Bible*

[3] Some of the following insights come from Ched Myers' article, *A Good Samaritan: Sabbath Economics in a society of thievery and hard heartedness.* A Good Samaritan

[4] Myers quotes Abigail Disney, who wrote in the June 23, 2025, issue of *The New Republic* https://newrepublic.com/authors/abigail-disney: "The last 50 years have been a sickening catastrophe for the working class, a slow-motion emergency [unfolding] right under our noses. Here we stand, with more wealth disparity than ever, with the super-wealthy unabashedly demanding ever more for themselves… This tax cut [comes] in spite poll after poll showing that the inequity is intolerable to the general public, and that the wealthy should be taxed more. All this has been happening while, at the behest and… assistance of the world's richest man the federal government continues to be strip-mined."

Amy-Jill Levine puts it this way. To really get what Jesus is doing in this story,

> We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask,
> 'Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge,
> "she offered help" or "he showed compassion"?'
> Is there any group whose members might rather die than help us?
> If so, says Levine, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan"[5]

In his book, GO AND DO LIKEWISE, Terry Kyllo suggests the lawyers' question, WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR really means: Who can I exclude from being my neighbor so that I don't have to love them?[6]

Jesus risked his public status, Terry says, by lifting up the despised SAMARITAN and making him a model of faithfulness. Instead of being the one who is spurned, the SAMARITAN, the outsider, the foreigner, is the one Jesus calls us to emulate.

But the Samaritan of the parable does more than show mercy in the moment. He makes an economic commitment toward the welfare of his enemy!

He invests his own resources to assist the man, not just with a single night's lodging but for an extended period—perhaps three weeks or more of room and board.[7]

> "To love God," writes Myers, "is to act as neighbor in compassionate solidarity with human suffering, no matter how far out of our social comfort zone it may push us;
> [no matter] how deep into our own pocket we must go to respond.
> Mercy, he concludes, is shown through the redistribution of private wealth."[8]

Now whether you fully subscribe to Myer's take on this parable or not, the truth is many of us here will be on the winning side of the BIG UGLY tax ledger in the short term.

How will the choices we make about what to do with the tax savings we didn't ask for or need—how will they measure up to Amos's plumbline?

And how will Jesus' words, GO AND DO LIKEWISE, find expression in our personal and collective ministry to those who are on the LOSING SIDE of the LEDGER?

These are questions worth struggling with.

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[5] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 148-149. Quoted by Matthew Skinner in *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 243.
[6] Terry Kyllo, *Go and Do Likewise*. Paths to Understanding, 2023, p. 49.
[7] Myers cites the work of Doug Oakman in this regard.
[8] Ibid.