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Pentecost C
Peace, Seattle
July 14, 2013
Amos 7:7-17, Luke 10:25-37

GETTING TO PLUMB

Every year, about this time, you can find Kai and me making trips to McLendon's and Home Depot, getting what we need to build another phase of a treehouse project that's been three years in the making—so far.

The first year we erected the base within the massive branches of the laurel on the west side of our property. **The second year**, we added walls and windows. And **this year's goal** is to get the roof on. But that's proving harder than we thought.

You see, the floor of the tree house is uniquely shaped, and because of this, there's scarcely a square wall anywhere in the whole structure.

On top of that, and in spite of our good effort, the floor isn't entirely level and the walls aren't entirely plumb—which has consequences for the roof of the treehouse.

We decided we wanted a roofline as unique and whimsical as the shape of the platform itself, and as we've tried to make that happen, we've run into all sorts of challenges.

- The roof's surface ebbs and flows, requiring every board to be custom cut. But to cut a board you need to first measure it. And how do you get a proper measurement when there's no level surface or plumb wall—no secure foundation from which you can measure and know that your measurement is true?
- You can't. And so you do a lot of improvising, and take several cuts at each board until you get it right—or at least as right as it's going to be.

When it comes to building a backyard treehouse, figuring it out as you go isn't a bad thing. It adds a measure of adventure to the whole enterprise. But when it comes to building and sustaining a society, a culture, a way of life, having a secure, level base and a plumb walls on which you can erect a system of justice, fairness, and compassion is a crucial.

And that's where our first lesson and gospel take us today.

> This is what the Lord showed me, says the prophet Amos. The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, 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;
> I WILL NEVER AGAIN PASS THEM BY."

God stands there with a plumb line in hand, and what does the plumb line show?

- The walls are all a kilter, the structure is unsound from top to bottom,
- the whole enterprise must be torn down.

To hear the specific evidence we can go elsewhere in Amos. Chapter 2:6 for example:

> 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.
> They lay down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed."

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Or Chapter 8:4,

> 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.

Something is most decidedly wrong in Israel. The foundation of its faith and ethics, what Brother Martin called the two tables of the COMMANDMENTS, love of God and love of neighbor, has been shoved aside—allowing those with power to press more self-serving agendas.

Practices anathema to God's dream for God's people have become commonplace. Dry rot has infected the wealthy and privileged of the land, putting the whole nation at risk.

We don't need a translator to interpret the warnings Amos gives—nor the reasons for those warnings. The gulf between rich and poor, the institutionalization of greed, our willingness to stand by while our elected leaders punish the poor for being poor—these are all very contemporary issues.

And they were contemporary in Jesus' day, too, seven and a half centuries after Amos spoke, when a certain lawyer came up to Jesus and asked the question, WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The story Jesus responded with is perhaps the best-known parable in all of Scripture—the Good Samaritan. And every generation since Jesus has found in this parable a built-in challenge every bit as daunting as the plumb line of Amos.

Who is my neighbor? The question brings us right back to square one. For every time we ask the question and think we've got the answer figured out, a new—often more daunting—situation confronts us, and we have to think it through all over again. Not only WHO my neighbor is, but HOW DO I TREAT that neighbor? What does BEING NEIGHBOR MEAN?

A story in the Seattle Times last Monday brought this home to me in a simple, powerful way. Maybe you saw it. Times reporter Christine Clarridge told about Lincoln Park resident Eliza Webb, who'd found a cellphone inside her ransacked vehicle last month.[1]

Webb, who works with high school students, figured the cellphone probably belonged to the person who'd prowled her car and that that person was likely a teen. But because she is married to a man who has paid dearly for his own youthful indiscretion, she decided not to call police.

> "I wanted to meet [this young man] and his parents and see if there might be another way," she said. "I felt if I could get him to own up to what he'd done and understand there were consequences, it could be a much better outcome."

So, instead of phoning police, Webb found the number on the phone labeled MOM & hit SEND.

When the prowler's mother answered on the other end, she quickly understood what was at stake, and invited Webb and her husband to come to her home and talk with her son.

When Webb and her husband arrived at the house, a mere five blocks from their own, the young man quickly owned up to what he had done and apologized.

[1] Abridged portions of the article are included in what follows. For full article, go to: http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2021351214_cellphonevigilantexml.html

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But what Webb did next ended up making the greater and more lasting impression not only on the boys and their families, but also on many of her neighbors: She took the 19-year-old and a cohort door-to-door throughout her neighborhood to apologize and return items they'd stolen from 13 unlocked cars.

Most neighbors thanked Webb and praised the teens for what they were doing. A few scolded and lectured the teens, and others shared stories about the trauma of being the victim of a crime.

> "I think it was good for them to hear how something that seems as minor as this can really rob people of their sense of security," said Webb.

Said one neighbor: "When people say 'It takes a village,' this is exactly what they're talking about. I was so impressed that someone would take the time to do this when they were not her own kids."

Webb said her block has an annual summer party and the teens have agreed to write a letter of apology that will be read at this year's event.

> "I'm actually kind of glad it happened," said the 19-year-old. "It felt terrible to hear that people are worried and feel like they have to lock the door because of what I did. In a funny way, I feel closer to my neighbors and kind of look forward to seeing them around in different circumstances."

His mother is deeply grateful to Eliza for becoming personally involved with her son and giving him the chance to face the people he victimized and make amends.

> "Kids need somebody besides their own parents looking at them and holding them accountable," says the Mom. "She did a beautiful thing."

Now, what might Jesus say if he'd heard a story like that?

How about: GO AND DO LIKEWISE.

Amen.