

“The Plumb Line”
Sunday, July 14th, 2019
Stouffville United Church

Amos 7 and Luke 10

It was many years ago when I first learnt how to wallpaper. I was moving into my first home. The house was built in the 1930’s in the Yonge and Lawrence area of Toronto and needed a lot of work to make it shine again. And wallpaper was the best way to deal with the condition of the walls. My mother-in-law, who was an expert wallpaper hanger, guided me in the steps of how to wet the paper, and slowly apply it to the wall, pressing out the air bubbles as you worked. But what was more important than any of this was first setting the plumb line. She climbed up a ladder, and holding the top of the plumb line in her hand, and with the weight at the bottom, I held the weight while she plucked the string and ‘ping’, there in blue chalk was the line to set up our first sheet of wallpaper. Houses can be very crooked as you soon discover when wallpapering into the next corner of the room!

The plumb line never lies. It never goes wrong. It cannot deviate. If I were to hang a plumb line over the pulpit it will hang because gravity is the force that gives it its perfection. Any number of you could come up here and hold the plumb line and drop it over the edge of the pulpit and you would all have the same results. Height, weight, age, experience makes no difference to the line of the plumb line.

In our text from the Book of Amos, we hear that Amos, a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, is looking at God holding a plumb line. He is witnessing God setting the plumb line in the midst of the people Israel. And God is thinking that everything needs to be rebuilt, as it is not what it should be. What should be straight is crooked. What should be level is uneven. And there is no truth in it. What should be a natural unfolding of the created order is turning into a place of waste and desolation. In the eyes of the creator, things are out of whack.

In his confrontation with the political priest Amaziah, Amos is standing like a plumb line, marking the line to challenge the role of public religion as it ‘masks injustice’.¹ Amos may be considered one of the 12 minor prophets, but for the modern day prophet, Martin Luther King Jr., Amos was his plumb line. One of King’s favourite lines from scripture is from Amos – “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, King writes, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eight-century prophets left their little villages (such as Tekoa) and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns ... I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown.”²

In the story of the Good Samaritan, God is yet again setting the plumb line. Jesus has a conversation with a lawyer who asks him, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” to which Jesus says, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” And, the lawyer quotes

¹ Feasting on the Word Commentary, 222.

² *Ibid.*, 223

the Deuteronomy text, “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 neighbour as yourself.” The lawyer then asks, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus responds with the story known as the Good Samaritan. A man has been robbed and beaten and left in a ditch to die. Two men walk by, intent on their business and ignore him. The third, a foreigner, an outsider, comes to the aid of the man in the ditch and in his willingness to turn to the man in the ditch, the plumb line shows up, reminding us of what is right and true.

The lawyer asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” It’s not enough to know *who* is your neighbour. It’s a two-way street. It’s knowing who your neighbour is, and its being a neighbour to them.

I was talking with my Advisor in Chicago about how to create relationships with those who are outside our four walls, and he remarked, “You can’t say that someone is your neighbour unless you’ve met that person. You can’t welcome a neighbour into your home for dinner unless you’ve gone over and invited them.”³ To be ‘neighbourly’ is to be ‘invitational’. To be neighbourly means to be in relationship.

What caused the ‘outsider’ to do the right thing, while the two men, a priest and a Levite (the Levites were the ‘religious’ tribe of the 12 tribes of Israel) who should have ostensibly known better because they were ‘church’ people, walked right by? The Samaritan turned to the man in the ditch, prompted by a willingness within to reach out to the other. That is something that isn’t scripted or done by paid employees but lies deep within the spiritual DNA within each of us.

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, wrote, “Christians ought to recognize that there is in the human spirit a certain “impulse to kindness” that may or may not be the consequence of this or that creed, moral code, or faith tradition.”⁴ But it is in our spiritual DNA. If we are created in God’s own image, God’s love for every person is encoded in us.

Tod Bolsinger, in his book, Canoeing the Mountains, talks about the DNA of a church. He defines a church’s DNA as a “way of describing the essential and unique attributes – the “defining essence” or code of that group ... that makes a congregation who they are. It includes elements like core values, essential theological beliefs ... and mission priorities.”⁵ Bolsinger describes three sources to a church’s DNA. There is the source of DNA “that is essential and must be preserved.”⁶ This DNA is what is truly sacred to our story and to lose this would be to lose our identity.

At Stouffville United, this would be the founding stories of our Wesleyan Methodist roots in a Mennonite town, our emergence into the United Church of Canada in 1925. And certainly the service of your ministers and others over these decades all become part of who we are as a

³ Discussion with Advisor Dr. Rich Kirchherr, June 27, 2019.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵ Ted Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

church – this is all a part of our story of faith and commitment and witness to the Gospel in our community.

Then there is the DNA that Bolsinger says can be discarded, as he asks, “what can we stop doing or let die so we can free resources and energy for new forms of ministry”⁷ And lastly, he asks, what DNA needs to be created through experimentation? In other words, “how can the church keep doing the things it is called to do, but in a way that resonates, connects, serves and challenges?”⁸

Our DNA as a church is a plumb line, reminding us as we gather in community of who we are, what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to seek justice, and if we follow Jesus’ parable from today, what it means to be *that* Samaritan in *this* time.

The Samaritan, the outsider, the foreigner, responded out of the love in his heart to reach out to help the one in need, someone whom he had never met before. And the plumb line went ‘ping’. And the love that is found in the DNA of his heart, showed him where true center is. The same spiritual DNA is within each of us, and shows us where true center is.

One of the first people I met at Stouffville United when I came here in September, 5 years ago, was Myrna Watson. Myrna passed away this week. She was truly a saint of this congregation. When I met her on that day years ago, she had a poem she wanted me to read – she had kept it on her fridge for years. And I copied it and it’s been on my filing cabinet ever since. To me, it speaks to the reality of the plumb line that runs right through the center of what it means to be in community. Here is part of it:

Who will be my servant in the twilight?
Who will be my servant in this day?
Who will be my voice out in the wilderness?
Is there one among you who knows the way?
If not me ... if not you ... if not us ... then who?

And I hear the sound of the plumb line going ‘ping’ in my heart.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.