

When We Need to Hear a Heavy-Handed Metaphor
A sermon on Amos 7:7-17 and Luke 10:25-37
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Earlier this week, as Ethel and I were exchanging emails, planning the details for today's service, I experienced what has become a familiar, albeit brief, moment of panic on my end of the conversation. The cause of this panic was a request from Ethel.

"Whenever it's convenient" . . . she said. . . "I need. . . a title . . . for your. . . sermon."

Of course, the note didn't *actually* read that way. Her question was totally reasonable, asked in a very reasonable manner - typed out just like the rest of her email. But, like so many interactions that can trigger a sort of gut reaction in us, *my* response to the exchange was much more about *me* than it was about *her*.

Though I'm still relatively new to preaching, I already know that I'm the kind of preacher who's gonna be working on every word of a sermon until I preach it. I will often spend weeks or even months thinking about the content of a sermon and I'm not sure if I'm waiting to get out of my own way, or waiting for the Spirit to come in, or waiting to be sure another piece of groundbreaking or heartbreaking news doesn't happen before the moment I step into the pulpit on Sunday morning, but the process of getting things from my head to the paper is still, well, kind of a process. Maybe I'm taking myself too seriously, or thinking too much or too little or, more than likely, it's my Myers-Briggs type. Whatever the reason, I can guarantee that, regardless of the project, chances are good I'll be working right until a deadline.

While there may be a day in my career when I can get away without having a title to my sermons, as of now, my method has been to go with the catchy vague approach - come up with something that's accessible, but not too specific - clever, but not *too* clever. I'm usually able to pick something that works well enough that I haven't yet gotten any comments on a huge gap between the title of a sermon and the message. At least. . . not yet.

This week, it would seem, I got a little ahead of myself. As I pictured the exchange between Amos and God, "When We Need to Hear a Heavy-Handed Metaphor" seemed like a safe enough title. I was thinking mostly of the image of the plumb line which, while the specifics of my message weren't there yet, I thought also of the Good Samaritan, the person who is so identifiable that any act of generous kindness or lavish welcome invokes his story.

As someone who, admittedly, can be a bit hard-headed, I appreciate the lack of subtlety in texts like today's - the heavy handed challenge that comes in those moments when scripture translates so readily to daily life that the message comes almost like a gentle swat upside the head - calling me to pause and to check in with myself, often leading me to the places that are hard to go. Amos's plumb line and the Good Samaritan both serve to challenge me in this way - keeping me both grounded and aware of any misgiving I may have about myself or others.

And yet, these stories, like so many in the Bible - especially the ones we are most familiar with - are often much more nuanced than our contemporary ears are cued in to hear.

Amos is delivering his message during the reign of King Jeroboam II, in the first half of the 8th century, a time when Israel saw both military and economic prosperity. Throughout their history, the people of Israel saw everything in the light of the covenant initiated by God that marked them as chosen people, set apart. As children set apart by God, they were promised offspring more numerous than the stars, taken through the Red Sea and out of slavery in Egypt. . . promised land and prosperity. God promised to dwell with them, and the temple was the place in which God's glory was manifest. The specificity of sacrifices and offerings laid out in the Law were not about pleasing God, but making a space that was suited to welcome in God's presence, so that God's presence might go out into the world.

The prosperity they enjoyed during Amos's time was seen by many as an extension of their covenant with God. And yet, the military and economic prosperity Israel was experiencing gave a particular advantage to those in positions of power whose lifestyles had become particularly opulent. Even more, their wealth was built through exploitation of the poor. The church and the government had become such comfortable bedfellows that in today's passage Amaziah, the head priest, refers to Bethel as not God's, but the king's, sanctuary.

Amos looks around him and sees that things don't add up, and his message of God's destruction is directly related to the broken relationship between worship and care for the marginalized.

This is the only time in the Old Testament when the word "plumb" appears, and it shows up four times in just two verses from today's passage. As a measure for vertical sturdiness, the plumb line is intended to determine the people's relationship to God as it shows up in worship and is then carried into the world. Worship, the place we engage with the intention of encountering God, is the measure by which we understand our relationship to one another.

Amos's warning comes to people whose worship is no longer about fellowship with God or liberation from oppressive authorities, but personal gain - as though their relationship with God is something to be manipulated; as though God could be fooled. The people have grown so accustomed to seeing themselves as children of God that they forget that being in a relationship with God requires certain responsibilities. God's claim on Israel as a covenant people brought with it the expectation that they would imitate God in the world by seeing to it that all people were treated with equality, that those on the margins were fed and clothed and able to live a dignified life. God initiates the action, but with it we are given the tremendous responsibility to work for justice and righteousness in the world. Our worship is how we stay grounded in who we are and who we are called to be.

In today's passage from Luke, we see another example of the ways in which worship impacts how we live in the world. A lawyer comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, in typical fashion when being tested, answers with a question and a reference to Scripture.

The lawyer responds with certainty, clearly aware of the law, and then, perhaps discontent that he's not flattered Jesus quite enough, presses him further. Jesus', again in typical fashion, responds with a story.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is a steep and dangerous passage, and on his way down the road, a man is beaten, stripped, and left for dead. He is then passed by not one but two people representing Israel's religious elite - a priest and a Levite, who's part of the priestly tribe of Israel. Neither of these two men stop to help the person dying by the side of the road. It's entirely likely the priest and the Levite thought they were doing the thing required of them by their faith and worship, passing the man by because they were concerned with becoming ritually unclean. Maybe they were afraid of who else may be journeying down the road. Regardless, it's unlikely they were cold or unfeeling - it's just that in that moment, as they passed by the dying man, their religious identity took precedent over his life.

A third man, though - a Samaritan, is so moved with pity that he not only bandages his wounds, gently caring for them with oil and wine, but he puts him on his own animal and takes him to an inn to take care of him. If you were to choose someone least likely to show such an act of benevolence, a Samaritan is about as extreme an option a you could choose. A hated enemy of Israel, loathsome and unclean with none of the knowledge of Torah the priest and the Levite certainly possessed. Clearly a

man of some wealth, he even pays the innkeeper to care for the man until he is well, ensuring he will return and reimburse the innkeeper for any additional costs he may incur.

The juxtaposition here, the difficult thing the lawyer then and we today must grapple with, is that it is the Samaritan who is the true neighbor and the one whose actions lead to eternal life - not the ones who know the right way to worship or have memorized every word of the Law by heart, but the one who lives that worship out in the world.

I was recently contacted by a woman I grew up with in Longview, Texas. Though we weren't ever particularly close, we also went to college together at Baylor and I confess prior to hearing from her, I likely would have categorized her as "very Longview" and "very Baylor" - code words which in my self-protective mode are often intended to mean very dismissive of my identity.

So, you can imagine my surprise when I learned that she was contacting me because for the last few years she's an RN and has been working with a growing number of transgender patients - right in Longview, Texas, and she was reaching out to say hello and to tell me how much she's learned about trans people. As we've been in conversation, she's begun telling me more about all she's learning, and about some of the pushback she's getting from people because of her care for the patients she's been seeing. She's been losing friends and the subject of gossip simply because she cares for all of the people who come to see her, regardless of their gender identity or health status. Her care for people who literally have nowhere else to go where they know will be seen and treated with dignity has become a cause of ridicule for my friend.

"I'm just tired of it," she confessed in a recent message. "I'm tired of doing the right thing and caring for people who need care and then hearing such hurtful and mean things from so many people around me - people who are good Christian people who I thought were my friends. I know I'm doing good caring for these folks, but sometimes it's just hard, you know?"

"I don't think anyone wants to think of what my day consists of. I go from lasering off cancer off the skin of an HIV positive trans person. . .to sitting with a suicidal heroin addict having a nervous breakdown...to happily telling the ex-drug abuser that their hepatitis c has been cured and they won't stop hugging me. I just wish people had hearts and open minds. There is not a soul out there without problems that need a kind helping loving nonjudgmental hand."

I have no doubt the people she's encountering such pushback from are good people - I likely know many of them. And I also know the messages they are likely putting back on my friend have been heard in their churches - if not overtly, then subtly through messages about who's clean and unclean. I know that language so well because I've heard it thrown around - sometimes at me. I also know that, depending on the day, if I were to pass by one of those people on the street and they'd been beaten and left for dead, I would really want to help - I would. But, I confess that if it were one of those days when my back is heavy with the weight of those words or my fear of isolation or retribution, I may struggle to do so. I want to live as I know I am called to live but, if I'm being honest, sometimes it's hard, or isolating, or just. . . scary.

As some folks may know, a couple of weeks ago I was ordained as a Minister of The Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA). The Monday after my ordination I was contacted by Franklin, a member of the Presbytery staff, informing me that the paperwork I'd submitted during my decade in the process of ordination no longer needed to be kept on file by the Presbytery, and I was kindly invited to pick it up. When I stopped by to get everything I got into a conversation with Franklin and we began discussing things that keep us grounded and steady. I mentioned gardening and Franklin talked about the ways meditation and breath keep him steady. Just taking a breath, he told me, could keep him steady and clear, even in the face of tension. When I asked more about what he meant, he stood up right in front of me and put out his arm, like so.

"Push me:" he said.

So, I gently pushed.

"See how when I forget to breathe, and I hold myself up in my shoulders?" he said. "When I do that, and you push me, [cue pushing], it's easy for me to topple."

"Check out what happens when I breathe and am grounded."

Trying this again, I pushed and, rather than spinning back or toppling, he gently swayed and kept his posture.

"It's as simple as breathing," he said. Breathing keeps us grounded and steady, and keeps us from the temptation to continue the ongoing power struggle we have with ourselves.

It's as simple as breathing.

Breathing - breath - the Spirit moving within us and connecting us to one another. It is the thread weaving us together in worship and carrying us into the world. And it's the thing marking us as a body. As the body of Christ in the world, we are called to carry that breath out, to bring the same kind of healing the Samaritan brings, that my friend brings, to those around us - not only the ones we love, but the ones we don't love. This kind of work is how our love and worship takes form when we go outside these doors, and as it is intended to make us and help us create a space together where a God dwells not only within us but among us. Our worship means nothing if it isn't lived out in our lives. And if our worship is preventing us from being the Body of Christ in the world, it's likely time to revisit what we are doing in our worship.

In a few minutes we will break bread and share communion together. As most people who've known me for even a short amount of time can attest, I'm a big fan of communion, and I've loved serving communion since I was ordained as a ruling elder years ago.

A few months ago, while serving communion at my home church, Ginter Park Presbyterian in Richmond, I was happily breaking off bread and placing it in people's hands when one woman took her piece, broke it in half, and handed it right back to me.

"You gave me too much." She said. "Here, take some back."

Unsure of what to do, I continued serving.

At the end of worship, while shaking hands with folks at the back of the sanctuary, another congregant approached me - this one a 5 1/2 year old named Gabe. Holding a quarter of the remaining communion loaf up to me he asked, "would you like to remember Jesus?"

I don't want to over-simplify things and say that if we breathe and break bread together, we can actually live into who we were created to be as God's people, but I truly do believe that if we breathe and break bread together, we can begin to understand more about who we are - not only individually, but together. And that, carries out into the world.

As people - individually and collectively - what we do here in our sanctuary - should matter. As the living, breathing body of Christ in the world, we are called to his ministry of reconciliation and we are called to believe that what we do in here matters when we step outside and if our walls are the thing keeping us from seeing ourselves as the body of Christ in the world, it may be time to ask ourselves

what those walls are really doing. We are all children of God - woven together in the Spirit, abundant and embodied in every single person we meet.

And we are invited to eat and to share the meal together, not just here with one another, but everywhere and with everyone we meet. The meal is abundant and life giving and will provide enough for all of us. And that is good news indeed.