

July 14, 2024

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

“A Plumb line and a Mirror”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Amos 7:7-15

The group also elected two people to serve as co-moderators of our denomination for the next couple years. In addition to running the actual meeting, the moderators are kind of like spokespeople. Commissioners elected the Rev. Tony Larson and the Rev. CeCe Armstrong, who grew up right here in Detroit at Calvary Presbyterian Church. It’s a pretty big deal to get elected as co-moderators. Tony and CeCe had felt called to this ministry. So before the meeting, they asked a friend to make them a pair of stoles, like this one I’m wearing, that they would wear if they were elected. When they got to put on the stoles at the meeting, the image on them was striking. Across the two stoles together, was the PCUSA logo—a cross, which includes symbols of the dove, baptismal font, Bible and the flames of the Spirit. But the cross and all these symbols were only fully visible when the two people wearing the stoles stood next to each other. As Cece said, “Apart we are not the body of Christ, but together, we are.”³

We posted a picture of the co-moderators and their stoles on our social media this morning, so you can take a peek at Facebook or Instagram to see them. As Tony and CeCe stood together, you can clearly see the symbols of Christ. And at the same time, the image isn’t perfect, draped as it must be, across their shoulders and bodies, moving as they do. The picture is not exactly straight and true. It is not a perfect mirror image or reflection of the symbols.

Which is a reminder, we are human after all. Surely Amos, and certainly God, know that as forgiven sinners, we will never perfectly measure up to the high calling of faith. Only God can bring the Kingdom into its fullness. But even as we stand a bit crooked, even as the edges of our image in the mirror are fuzzy, we do our best to reflect the image of Christ, to rise to the call to love our neighbor, to bring justice and equity to our community, to ensure that all God’s people are fed, clothed, and sheltered, and aware that they are beloved. It’s only by the grace of God that we can begin to live out those commitments. And as we do, we keep looking to the plumb line and the mirror to measure and guide our journey.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

A few weeks ago, our church welcomed a new class of leaders to their terms of service. Some of these leaders are called, in the Presbyterian Church, ruling elders. They’re the people who serve on our board, the Session. Now, many ruling elders don’t like that title very much. It sounds like they have some kind of special authority or power. Which they definitely do not; we’re all about servant leadership here. But instead of being powerful, we actually say, “ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation, but because they are chosen by the congregation to *discern and measure* its fidelity to the Word of God.” (Book of Order, G-2.0504). These folks are called to measure our faithfulness as a congregation; as a body. They discern whether we are living up to our calling as disciples of Jesus. When, together, we all fall short, they can help us find a new direction. When, together, by the grace of God we act in faith, they help us celebrate.

Amos, as a prophet of God, was also measuring faithfulness. He took a look at God’s people and discerned whether they were living up to God’s gracious covenant. He asked if they were sharing the kind of compassion that God had shared with them? Were they committed to freedom and liberation for people who were suffering, the way God had done for them when they were enslaved? Were they distributing resources so that all could live and flourish? This was not a measuring of the people’s value or worthiness or how much they were loved. This was measuring whether they were responding in gratitude to all that God had done for them. And it was communal. Amos was concerned with how, as God’s people all together, they were living out their calling.

God showed Amos a sign, a tool, to help with this measuring of the people’s faithfulness. It was called a plumb line. Though I don’t have one in our toolkit at home, the plumb line is a tool still used today and not much changed since Amos’ time. I saw one in action a few months ago when DTE workers came to put up a new electrical pole right outside my house. My family watched their work from the porch. Over and over again, one of the workers walked

1 Anne Stewart, “Commentary on Amos 7:7-17,” Working Preacher, July 14, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/3uk223pa>

2 Stephen Edmondson, “Theological Perspective, Proper 10, Amos 7:7-15” *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 222

3 Cece Armstrong, qtd in Greg Allen-Pickett, “The Story Behind the Stoles,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, July 2, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/e66kr3xe>

back from the site and held up a plumb line to determine whether the pole was straight. Was it standing tall? Was it true? As I understand it, the weight on the end of a plumb line falls straight toward the earth by gravity, and if a pole isn't in alignment with the string, then the pole is not measuring up. But if it lines up, the pole or wall is exactly vertical; it is plumb.

Amos held up the symbolic plumb line and determined that the people were not straight and true. They were not measuring up in their faith by the way they lived. Commentator Anne Stewart describes how the prophet knew they were falling short: "Amos critiques the social, political, and religious structures of Israel for their failure to uphold ethical responsibility. In particular, the prophet condemns the social inequity that allow[ed] the wealthy to luxuriate while the poor wither[ed], and he critiques empty worship that fail[ed] to promote justice and righteousness."¹ Essentially, the rich were getting richer and it was costing the poor in terrible ways. The people thought they were worshiping God faithfully, but out in the world, they were living like they didn't know God at all.

God, through Amos, declared the people's sin so serious, that destruction would be coming to their land. This notion of punishment can be hard for us to hear. We are people focused on God's grace and love; God's claiming of us in Christ. But the prophets, including Amos, show us just how much God is committed to justice, equity, fair economics, and compassion for those on the outside. God has an unrelenting commitment to these values out of love; not just speaking them, but living them. This is good news for those who suffer. For people, often people like us, though, it may be unsettling news. I think most of us here voice our strong commitment to those values. But our lived actions—our words, shopping habits, how or if we share our resources—all that may be more fuzzy and unclear. We might prefer that no one gets out their plumb line to measure how well we're living out those values.

We're not the only people who struggle with this. Amaziah, who served the King, was incensed at Amos' words. He heard Amos say that, because they didn't measure up, the kingdom would be destroyed, the king himself would be killed, and the people sent into exile. He tried to banish Amos from the northern kingdom, where he'd come to speak God's word. "Leave us alone," Amaziah said. "Take your plumb line back down south where you came from, and speak your terrible words down there." Amos though, knew that God had called him, so he pressed on.

When we do face some measuring of our community's actions, or of what it means to be the church, we often don't like it either. 'How dare you pass judgment on me,' we might ask? Like we talked about last week, it's natural to rebel against hard-to-hear messages, even when there is some truth to

them. But when measuring is done faithfully, when it seeks to serve the common good and turn us back toward God, then we can surely find other ways to respond to the message and the messenger. We can remember that measuring is not a judgment of our worth or our value or our belovedness. None of that is ever at stake. We proclaimed at the font today what we believe: God has already claimed us in love through Christ and nothing we ever do can change that. But our faithful response to that love, as individuals and as a community, ebbs and flows. Sometimes we may be right in tune with God, living with gratitude, caring for the stranger, honoring our neighbors. And other times, we fall short. We have a lot of room to grow.

Perhaps there is another tool that can help us know whether we are living in faith and living up to God's call. Clare of Assisi was a religious woman in the 13th century who, with her companion Francis, wrote about the life of faith. Clare sought to measure her life not with a plumb line, but with a mirror. Stephen Edmondson describes her perspective: "Christ is a mirror in which we can gaze on our true selves, so that we can see clearly those aspects of our lives that are out of plumb and repent of them, while seeing the true angle and dimension to which we are called."² We hold up the mirror before us to measure our faithfulness. In the mirror, we see both the image of Christ and our own image—we ourselves, and our whole community. Do the images match up? Do our image and our actions appear similar to that of Christ? Are we blessing the poor, serving those in prison, ministering to the immigrant, and working with those who have the power to make bigger changes so that all people flourish? If we hold up Christ as our mirror, is our own image reflected back in his?

Amos was speaking to the wider community of God's people, not just individuals. So it makes sense for us to think about our congregation, our wider church, when we measure our faithfulness. Over the last few weeks, commissioners from our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) met together at our biennial meeting. In Salt Lake City, hundreds of ruling elders, as well as teaching elders, which means pastors, met to discern and measure the faithfulness of our church; and to think about where we are going into the future. They recognized that the church, and our wider society, are falling short on efforts to reduce gun violence against children and on efforts to address the urgency of the climate crisis. They saw how Presbyterians had, for many years, treated LGBTQ folks unfairly and so decided to put in writing that the church may not discriminate against them, just as we also welcome and include people of all abilities, ages, races, ethnicity's, genders and worldly conditions. The commissioners measured our faithfulness as a body. They repented and sought to make a new path where we were not standing tall in faith. They celebrated the places we have been reflecting Christ well, building relationships and living out our commitments.