

## 7<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST ~ July 15, 2007

*Amos 7: 7-17; Colossians 1: 1-14; Luke 10: 25-37*

### **Merciful Alignment**

Do you know Don? He is a member here at Knox Church – he keeps in touch regularly and like the rest of you tries to be faithful in his attendance and his giving. He has difficulty being in church each week however in large part due to his volunteer ministry with Vancouver Island Outreach Services. His health isn't great and he has a family member who is very ill with cancer yet he reads his Bible and reflects on messages he has heard preached. He takes pocket-sized Bibles to hand out on the street along with food and blankets – a kind word and a listening ear. Don knows that a neighbour is the one who shows mercy and he has decided to go and do just that.

I don't know if Don has read the book of the prophet Amos – several people in the congregation have as part of our Monday afternoon study group. Even if Don hasn't read Amos I know that he has seen the problems that Amos talks about. Amos was addressing the world of his day some eight hundred or so years before the birth of Christ. He was challenging the nation of Israel. Yet everything Amos has to say could so easily be applied to the world of the 21st century.

Amos lived during an age of social, political and economic extremes just like we do. Boundless prosperity had become the norm among some sections of society. Yet the direst poverty was the norm for those who had failed to make it up the social ladder. Jeroboam II had ruled the northern kingdom of Israel for forty years. Israel had enjoyed the longest period of peace and prosperity since Solomon. The economy was in excellent condition. Trade was vibrant; money was plentiful. Political and commercial success had brought about a lavish life-style. The northern kingdom had become a nation of extremes – extraordinary riches and deepest destitution. For Amos it was time to act, time to speak about the visions God had revealed to him – visions of doom and punishment upon Israel – locusts, fire – and the revelation shared in our scripture reading this morning – the vision of a plumb line.

It's a curious image. God stops, stoops, takes time with Israel in order to judge, in order that there might be accountability. Most often when we hear the church plead for divine visitation; it's for the purpose of blessing. *Lord, come save us, give us, bless us* – that is our prayer. But Amos dares an image of a busy God who, although preoccupied with business elsewhere, takes time for Israel.

The time has come – indeed is long overdue – for God to measure the stature of the people – God promises not to pass them by. At the same time, God sets a plumb line against Israel, using a divine standard to measure the fidelity of God's people. This visit from God is presented as judgment – perhaps being the object of divine attentiveness is not necessarily the good news we want it to be.

In the good news of Luke's message, Jesus is on his busy way to Jerusalem where he has an appointment with Pilate. On his way a lawyer puts a theological question to him about the inheritance of eternal life. The lawyer stands with a question to which he knows the answer – the law says that for eternal life we need to love God with heart and soul and strength and mind. We also need to love our neighbour. In fact the lawyer assumes that eternal life is his birthright – he just wonders which technique will get him his inheritance in the most efficient way. After all, Jesus is a teacher of religion, and what

is religion for if it's not a technique to get whatever it is we desire? We have tried psychology, twelve steps to recovery, Prozac. We've tried following the letter of the law – what does it mean to love my neighbour?

I used to donate blood on a regular basis. Over one hundred donations and I'm on the list of bone marrow donors, too. I don't know how I came to get started but I have always enjoyed the opportunity to contribute in this small way. I even became a bit of a fanatic for the blood bank and the bone marrow registry, encouraging friends and family to participate, as they were able. One day I had some interesting questions from one of them: *Are you allowed to check out the person who might receive your bone marrow to decide if they deserve it? Don't you worry about who you might be giving blood to? Aren't you concerned about saving a criminal, a pervert, a loser, with the blood you donate?*

### **Jesus, who is my neighbour?**

What does religion offer earnest seekers-after-eternity like us when we come with questions like that?

*Who is my neighbour? Whom do I need to love, to care for, to concern myself with? Am I doing enough for the right people?*

Jesus responds with a story of a victimized man in grave need. A priest and a Levite both pass by on the other side. Then comes a despised Samaritan who approaches the victim, assesses and bandages his wounds, puts him on his own animal and takes him to an inn. Read in the context of today's passage from Amos, this is not only a story of active compassion but also a story of judgment. To those of us among God's chosen children who know full well what is written in the law, it is a bit insulting to have a Samaritan shoved in our faces as an example of someone we should emulate.

Many years ago while shopping with Tristan who was only four at the time, I watched as a woman fell and sliced open her forearm. It happened within a fraction of a second. One moment she was raising her hand in greeting, the next moment blood was dripping down her arm, pooling on the floor. I grabbed the woman's wound, applied pressure and tried to keep her calm. A staff person called 911. Tristan gaped. The injured woman ranted. She swore and cursed. She was demanding and unpleasant. She was in my arms until the ambulance came and took over her care. I mopped up blood after she left. The staff person got Tristan a drink of water. I wrote my eyewitness account of the event for the store. The woman sued. I still don't know how it turned out. But I think of the experience each time I read our lesson from Luke today and I wonder...

### **Jesus, who is my neighbour?**

I want an answer, just as the lawyer does, just as I'm pretty sure we all do. *Clarify the expectations Jesus, and we'll comply – perhaps no more than we need to but no less either.* However, Jesus doesn't cooperate. Jesus doesn't say, *He is your neighbour and they are too, but don't concern yourself with him or with her.* Jesus doesn't make a list of names or a set of criteria. Instead Jesus tells a story about how to be merciful – how to become a neighbour.

Good, Bible-believing people – people like any one of us here – people of faith pass by the man in the story Jesus told. The only one who stops is a Samaritan, an outsider, and when he stops, when he takes time, he becomes judgment for us. Don, the fellow I mentioned earlier, isn't in church every Sunday so

perhaps he isn't seen to be as faithful as some. He is not really an outsider but he isn't one of the elders or a board member either – yet he also becomes judgment for us – becomes a guide for how we measure our commitment to the compassion of Christ's way – a plumb line being held up against us. We know what is written, we know what is expected – and yet our behavior is a scandal to what we profess.

What does God really demand from us? Amos reminds the people of Israel – reminds us that what God requires is justice, fair-dealing, honesty, a sharing of earthly resources, a sharing of God's grace. Look at much of today's world and compare it with life in Amos's day, eight centuries before the coming of Christ. What would God's plumb line show today?

We gather in church to be closer to God. But how comfortable are we with proximity to a God who loves enough not to pass by but lingers long enough among us to judge, to hold us to a higher standard than that by which we measure ourselves? To a God who is not only loving but righteous, and rarely leaves us unscathed? God is no pale picture or limp projection of us and our felt needs. God wields a sword against our self-righteous presumption. Against our positive self-image God presents the Samaritan – one who may or may not have our theological commitments and yet embodies the faithfulness our God desires.

God sets a plumb line in our midst and calls us to account – calls us to realign our lives. May we be the ones who show mercy – the ones through whom God's love comes close. **Amen.**