

(Psalms 80:7, 18 NRSV) (Call to Worship)

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. ¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

(Amos 7:7-17 NRSV)

⁷ This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." ¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶ "Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' ¹⁷ Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

(Luke 10:25-37 NRSV)

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "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 neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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A Prophet in the Good Times

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: July 12, 1998

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: Amos 7:7-17

Luke 10:25-37

Look out for the good times. Look out for the times when everything seems to be going fine. Look out, because, as the old black spiritual says, even if the sun is shining now, the storm clouds will gather. Look out as the Jewish wedding teaches. At the end of the ceremony in a Jewish wedding the groom has to break a glass by stomping it with his foot. This breaking of something of value is meant, even in the great joy of one's wedding day, as a reminder that there is sorrow and loss in every household in the world, a reminder that even this family now being formed by marriage, too, will encounter them. Look out for the good times. They aren't permanent.

But we want them to be. O how we love the good times. As the Buddhists would say, O how attached we are to the good times. And herein lies another, even greater problem. We like the good times so well that we may close our eyes and not see anything that suggests the times aren't so good. And if we have the audacity to suggest that the times aren't so good, well, we better be prepared for some resistance.

Amos lived in the good times. After David and Solomon, really even before Solomon's reign was over, the great kingdom of Israel had begun to collapse. The borders that David had fought for lasted barely a moment. Assyria had not only taken many of the lands of the so called empire, but they had also humiliated Israel in the process.

But then came king Jeroboam II. Jeroboam had restored the national borders and pride. Once again Israel was respected. And once again she basked in wealth and well-being. The job in the king's court, the prophets job in the king's court, was to bow to the king in gratefulness, to praise the king for the good times, and to foresee the continuation of the good times forever.

Onto this scene came Amos, a reluctant prophet if there ever was one. Amos was a farmer and an orchardist, and glad he would have been to stay down on the farm. But God gave Amos a vision, a question. God said, when you hold a plumb line against Israel, what do you see? A plumb line was probably one of the first architectural and construction tools ever discovered. By hanging a weight from a string, you could build a perfectly straight wall. It allowed people to dig wells and build buildings which were sturdy and solid, because they were in line with the forces of gravity. And the question God gave Amos was, when you measure Israel with a plumb line, is she straight? Are the good times as good as they say they are?

Amos, the reluctant prophet, saw things so askew that he was drawn to the conclusion that Israel could not stand, that her king would be overcome, and that she would be forced into exile. Amos found that the good times in Israel extended to only an elite. And he found that her security was a sham.

Amaziah was the king's prophet, and the king's kind of prophet. He had no tolerance for this rabble-rousing farmer. He threw him out of the city and told the king of his treason. Amos stuck to his guns, but he was thrown to the margins by leadership who didn't want to hear his warning. For these were the good times, and no one wanted to hear otherwise.

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In a way, one has to suppose that Jeroboam and Amaziah know better, that they know there is truth in Amos's words. Otherwise they could have just laughed at him as a lunatic. But underneath, they, too, must have known the lie of the good times they professed. They must have known that both morally and militarily Israel's preeminence was a fraud. And they didn't want to hear it said out loud, for that would assail the small comfort afforded by their denial.

We human beings are complicated and many layered animals. We know things, and yet we can make denial work, at least for awhile. Psychologists tell us that a spouse is supposedly the last one to know about a partner's infidelity simply because it is too painful to face. The spouse isn't really the last one to know. In some ways, he or she is probably the first. But because the spouse doesn't want it to be true, he or she will live with denial, get angry at friends who try to warn them, even look for and try to believe any sign that it isn't true, until the denial is impossible to continue.

One has to assume that the lawyer in the this morning's parable knew more than he wanted to. He comes and asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He knew the answer. Jesus asks him what the Bible says, and the lawyer answers without a moment's hesitation, "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 neighbor as yourself." The lawyer knew the right answer, and he knew more than he wanted to know about what it meant. Maybe, like a spouse denying a partner's affair, he wanted Jesus to assure him that everything was alright. But in his heart of hearts he knew that loving your neighbor was a bigger and harder deal than it might at first appear. So, hoping against hope, he asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

In answer, Jesus told a story, the famous story we call the "good Samaritan." The funny thing about telling a story is that a story seems so innocent, but it probes an unearths those things we know but don't want to know much more effectively than the direct approach.

There's a wonderful and true story of a minister who underestimated the power of this very story, the story of the good Samaritan. It happened on Louds Island, the little island of the mid-coast of Maine on which I used to be a summer minister. Some years before I came there, at the height of the war in Vietnam, the minister came to preach the story of the good Samaritan. As luck would have it, behind him, sat the guest organist, the outspoken then minister of Yale University, William Sloane Coffin. In front of him in the pew sat the island's arch-conservative, anti-communist, America-love-it-or-leave-it hawk, Prescott. The preacher looked to and fro, saw nothing but a losing proposition, and finally he lost his nerve. He said, "Well rather than preach this story today," he said, "I think I'll ask you what you think it means."

I suppose he thought that by failing to preach, he would avoid setting off Prescott, who would, undoubtedly have then set off Coffin. He couldn't have been farther wrong.

Prescott, like so many of his peers, was a loyal American. He was grateful for all the country had given him. He was proud to be an American. And he saw the long-haired, draft-card and flag burning radicals and anti-war protesters as traitors. He saw the North Vietnamese as dangerous, demonic communists. Coffin thought he understood the world better than Prescott. He was an educated liberal, and he wasn't so stupid as to hate all communists. However, he had no trouble demonizing either Lyndon Johnson or hawks like Prescott. The polarization of both sides in those days left little room for reasonable understanding. And neither Coffin nor Prescott was on very good ground to be asked how neighborly he had been lately. And in their heart of hearts they both knew it.

So, when the preacher asked them what they thought the story of the Good Samaritan meant, Prescott grew red in the face and erupted, "I know what you're trying to say. You're trying

to say that those no good commies are supposed to be my neighbor.” It was the invitation Coffin was waiting for. He jumped off the piano stool and loudly explained just how stupid Prescott was. And thus began a battle that some on Louds Island say lasted through the night. In the end, the simple story of the Good Samaritan had probed and exposed the personal weaknesses that both men had and neither wanted to deal with. Like Amaziah and King Jeroboam, they raged on in denial.

I suppose, then, there are two levels to the stories, this morning. The first is, what weaknesses, what structural flaws would a plumb line held up to our society or our lives expose? We are in a remarkable period of prosperity. Unemployment and inflation are down. Return on investment is up. But what would the plumb line reveal? What’s wrong, even in the good times? What signs of trouble are there, even in the good times? Who is hurting even in the good times? And these who are hurting, are they lazy, brought-it-all-on-themselves kind of people? Or, are they our neighbors?

Or, we may turn the question around and ask it as the story of the Good Samaritan does. Who, even in these good times, is lying in the ditch? And, who of us are willing to be their neighbor?

The second level in the stories this morning asks a slightly different question. When we know in our heart of hearts that things aren’t quite plumb, that there’s more trouble out there than we want to admit, what do we do? Perhaps the most common approach, a la Amaziah, king Jeroboam, Prescott, and Coffin is to puff out the chest in righteous anger and point the finger, all in the service of denying, avoiding or distracting attention from the plumb line that is staring us in the face. Another, equally serviceable approach is to try to get someone to tell you that everything’s really alright. That’s what the lawyer wanted Jesus to do. Lord knows, they are both appealing ways to deal, or to avoid dealing, with things which are troubling.

There is another approach, but it is more difficult, at least it seems more difficult. You can hold the plumb line up, like Amos, and tell the truth about what you see. This may not help your popularity with those who say that anyone who thinks the sky is falling must be Chicken Little. And when you see things that are out of plumb, like a man in a ditch, rather than crossing the street, you can help. This one is inconvenient.

When you think about it, these aren’t very enticing propositions. You can see things for what they are. That will get a lot of people angry at you. You can see things that need attention and do something. That will be inconvenient.

Golly, maybe you’re better off in denial. But, you know better than that, don’t you. In the end, I’d rather be Amos with the truth in my hand than King Jeroboam with a sword in my gut. You can pretend everything is alright only to a certain point. And in the end, I’d rather be the Samaritan than the priest and the Levite that crossed to the other side of the street. Crossing to the other side of the street gets to be a habit. Trouble is, crossing to the other side of the street is essentially avoiding life. You don’t want to come to the end of your life, look back, and find that you’ve been dead all along.

So, look out for the good times. They may not be as good as they seem. And the cost of believing them to be may actually be paid with your life. On second thought, maybe it is better to tell the truth about what the plumb line reveals and better to be a neighbor. The resistance and inconvenience may be worth it. For life lived in the light of the truth and on the path of service is a life truly lived. It’s joy exceeds any the so-called good times can ever provide. Thanks be to God. Amen.