

Old South Church in Boston

June 10, 2016

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Is God Calling You To Be a Prophet?

A sermon by Rev. John M. Edgerton, Associate Minister

Based on Amos 7:1-14

God has always raised up prophets, in every era. Prophets are people who love an ideal so much that they will actually work to make that ideal a reality. God has always raised up prophets, and 2700 years ago, God raised up a prophet named Amos. 2700 years ago the God who loves the downtrodden lifted up a prophet named Amos from among the downtrodden. The book of Amos was written about Northern Israel, but it might as well have been written about America. The book of Amos was written 2700 years ago to a nation on the verge of catastrophe, but it might as well have been written about the events of the past week.

From the book of Amos today, we heard a vision. A vision about the great stone edifice of a building, with a plumb line held up against it. It's a vision of today.

A plumb line is a kind of tool, one of those tools that is both ancient and still in use today essentially in its original form. Nothing about the plumb line has changed. A plumb line is a string with a heavy weight on one end and it's used for constructing buildings. If you hold one end of the plumb line and let the weight drop, the string will form a line that is straight up and down. It will be straight up and down every single time, if you're standing on uneven ground, the plumb line is still straight up and down. If you're on the top of a mountain or in the middle of a desert or on the other side of the world, it makes no difference. The plumb line will always be a straight line up and down.

If you then hold a plumb line up against something that is supposed to be straight, say a pillar of a building, then you can check to see if the pillar—which is supposed to be straight—lines up with the plumb line—which is definitely straight. If the pillar is crooked, you can see it right away, because there's a gap between the plumb line and the wall. There's a gap between what is supposed to be, and what actually is. Plumb lines are not for looks either, if a pillar is crooked enough then it won't be able to support enough weight and the whole building will come tumbling down. If you want to build a building of any size, you need a plumb line, it shows when things are not the way they are supposed to be, when things have gotten crooked.

This is what God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, and in God's hand was a plumb line. 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; of course, this vision about a plumb line, it is a vision, not construction advice. The building in the vision is a metaphor for the society of Israel. And the plumb line is a metaphor too. The plumb line is a metaphor for what a prophet is supposed to do in society, or put another way: a plumb line is used for in making sure the pillars of a building aren't crooked, so the building doesn't come tumbling down. A prophet is supposed to make sure the pillars of society aren't crooked, so the whole nation doesn't come tumbling down.

Every society has pillars. Ideals that make that society what it is. Ideals that keep the society intact and uphold its institutions. For Amos, 2700 years ago in Israel, the central pillar of society was that all

people were bound by living under the Law of God. A single set of laws—equal for everyone—a law whose legitimacy was beyond question because it came from God’s own mouth, a law whose justice was above any human differences because the author of the law had no partiality. There was only one people, the people of God, there was only one law, the Law of God. Living according to the Law of God was, in fact, what made them the people of God, it’s what made society more than the naked violence of the strong against the weak. That was what the Law was supposed to mean, anyway. It was supposed to be a strong and upright pillar upholding society. But how do you check if a pillar—which is supposed to be straight—really was straight? You need a plumb line. Amos the prophet held up a plumb line to society and saw that powerful and privileged were living like they were above the law—ignoring the Sabbath and cheating poor people out of what little they had earned. The powerful were allowed to do whatever they pleased with no consequences and no regard for justice. Amos saw there were really two laws one for downtrodden and one for the powerful. Amos held a plumb line up to society—something was crooked. The central pillar holding the whole society up was so crooked that Amos could see the whole thing starting to crack and come apart under its own weight.

Prophets are a lot like plumb lines. Nothing about the plumb line has changed, they’re still essentially the same as they were 2700 years ago. Prophets are still the same as they were in the days of Amos 2700 years ago. Prophets still hold a plumb line up to the pillars that are supposed to hold up the weight of society to see if something is crooked. There are prophets on the streets of Baltimore and Ferguson and Baton Rouge and the Twin Cities. With the killing of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of police, the nation is once again hearing the words of prophets whose message is bone simple, that Black Lives Matter. To say that Black Lives Matter is to hold a plumb line up to the central pillar of American Society, that there is equal protection under the law.

What is at stake is the legitimacy of the law, the power of the law to regulate lives, the power of the law to bind us together as one nation instead of warring tribes. Equal protection under the law means no individual can choose to ignore the restrictions of the law, because no individual is deprived of the protections of the law. Everyone is equally bound by the law, because everyone is equally protected by the law. There is one law, applied to all people, with no-one eligible for special protections or special scrutiny. That was what the Law is supposed to mean, anyway. It is supposed to be a strong and upright pillar of society. But when year after year black people are killed by officers of the law, and year after year the justice system excuses their killers with technicalities of the law, and year after year the lawmakers refuse to reform the law, then what happens is that the law becomes illegitimate. Because if a whole race of people are denied equal protection of the law, then the law itself has no force beyond the naked violence of the many against the few. And what do we see? Some are protected by the law, others are killed by the law—is that equal protection, or is something crooked? A plumb line.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a prophetic movement like Amos is prophet. And like all prophets, the Black Lives Matter movement is built on love of an ideal. Black Lives Matter is prophetic because they love the ideal of equal protection under the law so much that they will actually work to make that ideal a reality. It is a plumb line held up to the American ideal of equal protection under the law. And that plumb line shows that the central pillar of our society is crooked. And that pillar, if it is not repaired, the weight of this whole structure of society will come tumbling down. I can see the cracks forming in the walls. Can’t you? Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Lorne Ahrens. With the inexcusable murder of five police officers in Dallas, it is clear for all to see that something is terribly wrong.

God is always raising up prophets, in every generation, in every nation, in every city, in every church! God may be trying to raise you up as a prophet. But I’m no prophet—you might object—I’m an

accountant for God's sake! Or maybe you're a lawyer, or maybe you're unemployed, or maybe you're working three jobs, or maybe you're a full time parent, or maybe you're a shepherd, or maybe you're a dresser of sycamore trees, it makes no difference to God. What matters to God is whether there is an ideal you love so much that you will work to make that ideal a reality.

God is always raising up prophets in every generation, and in the life of every Christian there are times when we all must ask ourselves whether God is calling us to be prophets. Is God calling you to be a prophet? A prophet who loves an ideal so much that you are willing to work to make that ideal a reality? I can't answer that for you, I don't know God's call on your life. But I can see cracks forming in our society. I can see that this nation needs prophets. Is that you?

Scripture Reading

Amos 7:1-14

This is what the Lord God showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, "O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" The Lord relented concerning this; "It shall not be," said the Lord. This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord God was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. Then I said, "O Lord God, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" The Lord relented concerning this; "This also shall not be," said the Lord God. 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. 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; 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."

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. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees."