

So, we spent time with family in Ely over the July Fourth weekend, and one of the games we played together was Jenga, which is so much fun *and* requires considerable skill, actually. Most of you probably know the game, but if you don't, here is how the game defines itself: “*Jenga* is a [game of physical and mental skill](#) created by British [board game](#) designer [Leslie Scott](#). The name comes from the [Swahili](#) and means 'to build or construct'.^[1] Players take turns removing one block at a time from a tower constructed of 54 blocks. Each block removed is then placed on top of the tower, creating a progressively more unstable structure. The game ends when the tower falls over.” As I say, it's fun, it's suspenseful, and it's definitely a test of one's ability to perceive if a structure is sufficiently well balanced to stand. It's amazing how many blocks can be removed and the tower somehow remains up, but there comes that point of no return, where the balance is too far compromised for it to remain upright, and over it goes with an impressive jumble and tumble of blocks. It was too far out of whack to be sustainable.

In our lesson this morning from Amos, we have a similar image used by the prophet. Amos refers not to keeping the tower of a Jenga game in balance, but rather to keeping a *wall* plumb, true to line, and balanced. Here, I brought along this visual prop to assist us: a plumb line. Not quite jenga, but it's the same principle: a stone wall must be plumb, it must be properly balanced and true to line, if it is to remain standing. Sometimes, such a wall or a tower may last longer than we'd expect with out-of-plumb or off-balance elements---look at the Leaning Tower of Pisa! But, over time and inevitably, if too many blocks or stones are missing or misaligned, the structure cannot stand. This is the critique Amos offers of Israel, on God's behalf, in our lesson today.

Let's get ourselves oriented to the context of our lesson for a moment, given that it was written about 2,800 years ago in a foreign language in a nation half-way around the world. Amos is prophesying around 850 BCE in the nation of Israel. Let's back up for just a moment and refresh our memories. Because it was in 1000 BCE, the date engraved on your hearts and minds, that King David united the 12 tribes of the Hebrews into one nation of Israel. Unfortunately, this golden era didn't last long, and by 150 years later, when Amos shows up on

the scene, a civil war has divided Israel into two nations, much as our own civil war might have done, a northern and a southern nation. The northern nation retained the name of Israel; the southern nation was called Judah. Israel was ruled by King Jeroboam at this time, and the King's chief priest, headquartered at Bethel, was Amaziah. All was not well in Israel. There was a vast chasm between the opulent lifestyle of a few wealthy and elite leaders and the vast majority of the impoverished peasantry, who sustained the opulent lifestyle of the few by their own labor and misery. Dishonest trade and exorbitant taxes kept the rich, rich and the poor, poor. Surrounding nations threatened their national security, and yet the elite and powerful were willfully blind both to the inequities *within* their nation and the significant threat from *without* their nation. God is not pleased. The tower is not sufficiently balanced; the wall is not plumb; the structure will collapse beneath its own weight and lack of true line. God sends Amos to make this clear.

Who, then is Amos? As it happens, Amos is a sheep herder and tree dresser from the *southern* nation of Judah. All we know of him is his profession and his hometown, which was Tekoa, a small village 12 miles south of Jerusalem. Amos is *not* a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. He is *not* a priest. He is *not* a scribe or a lawyer or of royal lineage. He's just a guy doing his job, observing the folly and injustice of the nation just to the north of him, until God lights a fire in his gut that demands speech and action. Compelled by God and probably his own sense of justice, Amos abandons his livelihood, leaves his country, and heads north to offer this critique on God's behalf to those in power. You can imagine how popular this made him. It would be like someone from Mexico, who had no official standing or political credentials, coming to our country to point out how far off kilter we actually are. We would resent this, and certainly the elite of Israel resented Amos's words. In fact, Amaziah, the most significant religious official at that time, tells Amos to be quiet and go home. Amos refuses, because he is on a mission from God. We don't know anything more about Amos; how long he remains in Israel, if he ever gets back to his sheep and sycamore trees, how and when he dies, or anything—we don't know. We just have his words, from 2,800 years ago, and they continue to resonate powerfully. We are more familiar with the verses from Amos 5:21-24: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. (Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.) Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” As I said, Amos spoke for God, looking to see that Israel was just, that the line of the socio-economic structure was true to plumb, and it was *not*. Therefore, Amos predicts that Israel will fall to foreign powers, due to its inherently unjust infrastructure and blind arrogance, and about 30 years later, he is proved correct. Israel falls to Assyria and is largely dispersed, leaving only Judah, the southern kingdom of the original united nation, to continue on for the next couple of centuries, until it also falls.

There are two misconceptions we easily fall into as people of faith that may impact how we hear this text. One is that the prophets were essentially fortune-tellers, forecasting future events. While it is true that prophets may, like Amos in our lesson, project an outcome for God’s people, their primary focus is on a critique of the present and how it is leading towards that outcome. Prophets were far more like impassioned activities and advocates, than they were like someone gazing into a crystal ball or reading palm lines. Secondly, we tend to think that God’s concern is always primarily about us and our personal morality and the health of our souls, but truthfully, that’s a perspective shaped by the prosperous western culture in which we live, with our emphasis on individualism. The Bible reflects communal culture, and God is far more often concerned with public ethics and justice. God looks for those who are vulnerable to be protected by those who have the ability to do so; *that* is the purpose of both the law and the prophets; to call for just and fair ways of life that protect that who need protection and might otherwise be overrun by the strong. So, as a Christian, we are, of course, called to live lives of integrity and personal morality, yes; but we are *also* called to act justly on behalf of the other humans with whom we share the planet, and not only the other *humans*, but the other living creatures and the planet *itself*. We confirmed three of our young people two weeks ago, and this morning we baptize Emmett James Ross. Within both of those services are found these words: Do you promise to strive for justice and peace? The confirmands answered on their own behalf; parents answer on behalf of their child when a child is being baptized. Striving for justice and peace are Christian callings, and God has a passion for seeing that not only individuals, but nations, take up this calling.

Why is this a problem? Shouldn't we want to live justly? Don't we *want* to have our block tower well-balanced and our wall true to plumb? I think we do, at least in part. But, I can think of at least two issues that stand between us and just living. One, is that living justly rubs up against some of our innate self-interest, doesn't it? My husband, by way of example, asked at our text study group, "If they knew how to completely right the leaning tower of Piza, would they?" And of course, the answer is "no"! Who would pay to go and see a straight tower of Piza? We prefer it off-kilter, because it's profitable. Whenever profit is the bottom line, it's very difficult to keep that wall true to the plumb line. Not only profit, perhaps, but comfort, prestige, power, privilege. All of us are insightful and globally minded enough to recognize that our rather privileged lifestyles are often built upon the inequities of those farther down the food chain---on child labor, on barely subsistence farmers, on environmentally unsustainable practices---sometimes near at hand, sometimes in a third world nation---but it's virtually *impossible* for us to be standing at the height at which we stand without someone else's back bearing some of the weight. It's a grim reality of life, basically. This was especially true during the tragic part of our national history when slavery was legal and legitimate, as the story I read last week, Box, described. In that kind of a slave economy, it was brutally evident that the wall of justice was not true to the plumb line. It's less brutally evident now, but I fear it's still true, just a little more remote. It's very difficult for us to recognize injustice and act justly when doing so runs *contrary* to our own self-interest, profit, and privilege. That's original sin; that's human nature.

A second issue that stands in our way, I believe, is that we lose the ability to accurately *assess* how our wall lines up with the plumb line. To return to the example of Box, of slavery in the southern United States during the 19th C, Richmond, VA, was a bustling city in which whipping posts, slave pens, and slave auction houses were scattered everywhere throughout the city and considered the norm. The good folk of Richmond did not perceive that these were evidence of a society that was teetering on the brink of collapse and was far from true to the plumb line of God. Custom, and perhaps some willful blindness, completely took away their ability to judge the justice or injustice of their way of life. And just as our love of our *position* stands in our way, so does our being *accustomed* to an off-kilter wall stand in our way, even now. Sometimes we literally

can't perceive how far from plumb we are! Which is why voices like Greta Thunberg from Sweden or Martin Luther King Jr. are so important; they are the prophetic voices that hold up God's plumb line of what is right, true, and just, and try to remove our blinders to recognize that our jenga tower may be seriously compromised and on the verge of collapse. This off-balance is not God's intention for us or anyone. Prophets like Amos make this uncomfortable truth all too plain for us.

This plumb line of God's can be held up to our individual lives, to our national lives, perhaps to our congregational lives, as well? How would we know how our congregation is stacked up beside a plumb line? I would think one way to understand this would be if our actions are congruent with our values. Which is to say, we profess to be a welcoming congregation, to be concerned about those in need, to be looking for ways to extend God's grace into our community and our world. Do our policies, our giving, our actions, line up with those values? There's always room for improvement, but I do believe that we genuinely look to right some inequities, to share of our bounty, to welcome the stranger, in a variety of ways-- from our community picnics, to our giving to world hunger, to our support of the Center for Changing Lives, to our outdoor worship services and so on. We should probably think about these things and not take for granted that we're always in the right. It's always wise to be self-reflective; that holds for individuals, nations, and congregations. This plumb line metaphor might be one more way for us to reflect on our ministry, to try to avoid those blind spots.

The truth is that I find it easier with texts like Amos 7 to identify with the problem----our walls are not true to the plumb line---than to move forward from that recognition towards positive action. But here's just a few suggestions for consideration. They're no better than your ideas; I just happen to be the one standing up here speaking. Maybe they can inspire all of us to creative thinking. I wonder if we might try to extend and sensitize our injustice antennas, our inequity sensibilities, in order to perceive more accurately how life actually is for other people and other groups. We are not everyone; everyone else is not just like us. Awareness is often a first step towards action. I wonder also if we might try to find our voice, to speak a little more bravely, about things that matter to us, about those things that God lights a fire within our gut about? The trick is to do this in a way that respects others and acknowledges our own short-comings, but also speaks truth. This is always a

challenge, especially within an election year. But maybe we can focus some attention *on* that challenge.

Finally, I wonder if maybe we should try to make fewer easy choices, but pick the harder choices sometimes, the ones that make us uncomfortable or challenge us, for the sake of others. All of us might consider ways to live more justly with that plumb line of Amos in our minds.

So, Amos, this morning, doesn't settle us into a comfortable recliner chair and pamper us with snacks and beverages, does he? We wish he would, but he doesn't. Instead, he speaks for God, who holds that plumb line and looks for us individually, congregationally, and nationally, to live true to that standard. A standard of justice, of shalom, of righteousness. It's not a low bar or an easy ask. It's a challenge, but a challenge in which God blesses us with faith and courage as we approach it. God asks us to take up that vision of a world in which "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amen.