

*Sermon by Pastor Molly Doreza  
“The Plum Line of Justice”*



*When the world is off kilter and we don't notice the imbalance any more, God tells us it is our job to bear witness to justice with the oppressed, and to rebuild God's saving love. This French sculpture is indexed under ensemble pour la paix et la justice: together for peace and justice. It is implied that the search for justice should be pursued in a way that does not impede or jeopardize the promotion of peace.*

Have you ever tried to build something without a level? Did you eyeball it? Did you rely on angle measurements? That sometimes works, until you set it on or in the ground. Then, no matter how true your right angles are, the table will be off kilter.

No builder would think about pouring a foundation that wasn't level. It would cause problems throughout the rest of the house: setting the doors, windows, roof. And it certainly wouldn't pass inspection in this day and age.

And even if a foundation starts out level, it may shift over the years. In which case it needs to be leveled again or everything will be in jeopardy.

Life is like that. While we think we have a proper orientation, using only our own "eyesight" - experience and wisdom - our perspective is likely to be askew. Unless we use a level or a plum line which establishes the center of gravity.

But what is that level, or plum line? What is our center of gravity? It is easy to become disoriented. Last week, as we drove through the Colorado mountains, I was baffled to find that when I thought we were driving up, we were in fact driving

down. And vice versa. Sometimes the only way I could judge was by looking at my Jeep's fuel economy gauge. If it read 7 mpg we were going up. If it read 99 mpg we were going down.

I couldn't rely on my own perception of things. And in my experience, this doesn't just relate to my physical orientation – but my emotional, psychological and spiritual as well. I've learned that I need something else – something else – to help me get to the center where I belong.

It works that way with community as well. Sometimes we think we are on the right track, heading in the right direction. . .but we really aren't. We get satisfied and used to being askew, or off kilter and we don't notice the imbalance anymore. That's exactly what happened to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in her early history. And that's why the Prophet Amos – who was from the southern kingdom – came to speak to them.

The prophet Amos employed the imagery of a plum line in his vision condemning Jeroboam II (paradigmatically Israel) who wasn't living up to God's expectations for them. Using God's plum line as he understood it, Israel was off kilter in two ways: It allowed idolatry in worship and rampant economic and social inequality. Amos' plum line measurement – the vertical and horizontal orientations God has set forth were: mishpat and tzedakah, justice and righteousness.

The prophet Isaiah also calls on this same plum line: "I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plum line." (Isaiah 28:17).

I wonder if we need to look at our own personal and societal plum lines today? Last week, we observed a marathon of Independence Day celebrations. Over several days, we unleashed record numbers of fireworks, and ate ourselves silly with hamburgers and hot dogs, potato salad and watermelon. It was "reverie on steroids", as we not only celebrated the birth of our nation, but our coming independence from Covid 19.

As Tom and I hoisted our flag last Friday, I was filled with joy and thankfulness for our country. But I also felt something else. There was a pang of grief, a stab of discomfort as watched it wave in the breeze.

You see, there are many in our beloved country who are unjustly treated. Many who long for the righteousness our constitution promises, but due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender can't fully participate in its freedoms.

I wonder if we are not like the Northern Kingdom and its King, Jeroboam, in that we've gotten so used to the way things are – that we don't notice how off kilter we are from our constitutional ideals.

There have been many Amoses throughout our history who are calling us to become the country of mishpat and tzedakah that our founders dreamed of. But we've struggled, over our history – unwilling to look at what is really going on, to see that things are not “level” for all of us.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail speaks not to the white racists of his day, or the Klansman, but to “white moderates:” “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom. . .is the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”

King drew examples of how complacent “moderation” results in Holocaust. He knew that, without the plum line of “justice” we get used to our “order” or way of doing things.

Spirituality, over the past centuries has become intensely personal, a sort of “me and Jesus” experience – heedless of what is going on around us. But where is the plum line in that? If we remember that the second part of the Great Commandment is to love our neighbors, we realize that a “me and Jesus” attitude is off kilter.

The Bible is a book about justice. It's stories, its moral values, its promises – all of it – cannot be understood without a hermeneutic of justice. It is not, primarily, a plum line for the individual – but for the community. It helps us make sense of why there is suffering when there is not justice for all, and helps us understand that the goal of the church is to attach itself and its mission to that plum line of justice.

The Apostle Paul, who has grappled many times with his new church's inequities, reminds us that we are all children of God – chosen by God – and every one of us can lay claim to the blessings of God's love. We simply cannot claim those blessings for ourselves if others don't have the same access. And without the plum line of justice, things go horribly wrong. Prophets among us get killed; Martin Luther King and John the Baptist to name two.

J. Leavitt Pearl, director of the Atkins Center for Ethics at Carlow University says:

“Justice as a plum line not only provides a means for critique, but likewise a tool for the construction of communities which, while they may never fully live up to their measure – may nonetheless stand tall and upright, may uplift those within and without; and proved a “foretaste of future blessing” (2 Corinthians 1:22).

And with this plum line we can proclaim, as the psalmist:

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*

*Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.*

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

*The Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps. (Psalm 85:8-13)*

*Amen*