

A VISION OF A PLUMB LINE
AMOS 7: 7-17

July 11, 2010 – The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Having published ten novels, finished an eleventh, written a memoir and four other works of fiction, polished off countless columns and magazine articles, covered a few wars, briefly run the newsrooms of two newspapers and landed on a list of four hundred New Yorkers described as helping to define the city over the past four centuries, Pete Hamill figured it was time to graduate from high school.

So, last Saturday he did.

Two days after his seventy-fifth birthday, fifty-nine years after dropping out of New York's Regis High School as a thoroughly sophomoric sophomore, Pete Hamill received an honorary diploma from the Jesuit-run school. "The Jesuits," he said, "believe in taking their time on the big decisions."

Dropping out of high school was a very dumb thing to do in 1951, but it's an even dumber thing to do today. "Try getting a job on a newspaper now without the resume," Hamill said. "Not a chance. Or finding a job in a steel mill, as he did. "You would have a hard time finding a steel mill."

One thing that intrigued me in the *New York Times* story about Pete Hamill's "graduation" from high school was what he said about being a Catholic. "Somebody once said there's no ex-Catholic, there's only retired Catholics...I'm a retired Catholic."

In this very diverse congregation, we have some retired Catholics, a number of retread Protestants and a huge number of recalcitrant former believers, retired fundamentalists and refugees from a pietistic past. These are the people to whom the prophet Amos's vision of the plumb line speaks. A plumb line is a very simple yet necessary tool—a weight fixed to the end of a string—utilized in the construction of a wall. Reliant upon gravity, it gives the builder a true measure of that which is straight. Using the plumb line is crucial if the structure is to be strong and enduring.

We live in an age that considers itself immune from the judgments of anybody, including those of a righteous God. Despite our judgmental willingness to have two million Americans incarcerated in a system that is overloaded and thoroughly broken, we are squeamish even talking about God's judgment. Because our criteria for judging anything or anyone or any situation is derived exclusively from ourselves, we declare "Who are you to judge me?"

The preacher has her hands full in proclaiming a story about a God who does not hesitate to enlist a theological amateur like Amos in the task of holding accountable a powerful political priest like Amaziah. Amaziah was the Billy Graham, the Kirbyjon Caldwell, the Joel Osteen of

his day. He had ingratiated himself with the royal court through his duties at the sanctuary at Bethel. He is one in a long history of the court-preacher, those who have the ability to speak pleasing words to powerful people, soothing their consciences and telling them what they want to hear.

The late Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin said that it is “the preacher’s job to call for justice to flow like a stream and righteousness to roll down like mighty waters. The politician’s job is to work out the irrigation system.” That does not mean we have no interest in the details!

The Rev. Emmanuel Cleaver, a United Methodist pastor and a member of the U.S. Congress from Missouri. Congressman Cleaver reminds us that Jesus asked Peter to ‘feed my sheep.’ Sheep, you see, are the only animals God has created without any means of natural defense. It’s a miracle sheep are still here. They’re still here because they have shepherds. The United States is the richest country in the world. We have a responsibility to those who live in poverty.

Emmanuel Cleaver is originally from Texas. After he achieved fame and prominence in Kansas City, he was invited to return to and preach in the small church where he grew up. The little church was packed. In fact, they had to open the windows so people could look in from the outside. Cleaver says he was feeling pretty proud of himself that day, but he had failed to prepare at all for the sermon so he looked at the familiar faces and asked, “What would you like for me to preach about?” He said his first grade Sunday school teacher, now long retired, stood up and said, “Cleaver, I want you to preach about three minutes!”

Amos trusted God and answered the call to speak the truth to a wealthy nation that sold into slavery “honest men who cannot pay their debts, poor men who cannot repay even the price of sandals. They trample down the weak and helpless and push the poor out of the way.” (Amos 2:6)

We live in a time in this nation when untold billions are devoted to war and the weapons of war but the scraps of the table are not used to provide health care to our children and millions are losing their homes because of unjust lending practices.

The prophet Amos was a farm boy, a shepherd from a small Judean village. He was called by God to the difficult mission of preaching harsh words in a smooth season. During the time of Amos, eight-hundred years before Jesus, King Jeroboam III ruled. Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity that was never to be reached again.

The military security and economic affluence which the people saw and enjoyed made them think that these were signs of God’s special favor toward them. Moreover, they felt they deserved such gifts.

Amos denounced Israel for its reliance upon military might. He denounced his nation for committing grave injustice in social affairs. And, he denounced his people for shallow, meaningless piety.

“I hate, I despise your feasts,

**and I take no delight in your
solemn assemblies.**

**Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps
I will not listen.**

**But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.”**

(Amos 5:21-26)

So, of course, this unknown farm boy who comes to the big city of Jerusalem and denounces the seemingly peaceful, and certainly self-satisfied, nation of Israel gets into trouble. His forceful uncompromising preaching brings him into conflict with the religious authorities and those who held political, economic, and military power.

Recall that one of Martin Luther King's trademark lines came from Amos. In speeches and sermons from Montgomery to Memphis, from Riverside Church and his powerful indictment of the war in Vietnam to August, 1963 in our nation's capital, King would clinch the power of an oration by proclaiming, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." As Dr. King came to see American racism rooted in a political economy indifferent to the poor and committed to making war wherever we please, he began to anticipate that God's offer of justice to a people wholly corrupted by social sin must come as a world of judgment.

I am always amazed Amos is characterized as a 'minor prophet' by those who do not understand that the difference between a major prophet and a minor prophet is determined by the length of the book. What's minor about his message? What's minor about telling the truth? Of course, the prophecy of Amos is considered minor because he doesn't preach a long sermon. Many of us consider someone who preaches a short sermon to be a major preacher.

The king ordered Amos to go to the land of Judah and do his prophesying there. Get out of here. Go somewhere else. But Amos replied that he was doing what God had commanded him to do. He was just a shepherd, a dresser of sycamore trees whom God has chosen for this demanding job of caring for the sheep.

Amaziah made it personal. He said the problem was Amos. Amos made it personal, too. But he was also addressing systemic problems and he had a solution to offer. Repent, stop the corruption and bribery, treat the poor fairly, hate what is evil, and love what is right but don't bring God burnt offerings and grain and think you will be forgiven your sins.

Troubled by the denial and blaming that he found in his church in a time of decline and diminishing returns on evangelistic efforts, Will Willimon consulted an organizational consultant who said something like this: "Every troubled organization is filled with fear. In such a situation the leaders have the responsibility to face the fear and to tell the truth, to say, 'You are in denial because you are fearful that you don't have the resources to face the truth about your condition

and do something about it.’ A leader must put an organization in pain that it has been avoiding at all costs. The leader tells the truth out of faith that the organization already has the needed resources to face the facts.”

Wherever we live, each of us is called to tell the truth. When children are without health insurance, when God’s Creation is at risk, when immigrants are especially vulnerable, when predatory enterprises target our people for addiction, when HIV/AIDS demands our attention we are the ones who seek to bring healing in the name of Jesus Christ.

The Bible doesn’t offer us happiness. Happiness depends on external realities: what we own, where we live, whom we know. God offers us joy, which is more than happiness. Joy derives from internal realities: faith in God, love of others—what John Wesley called ‘scriptural holiness.’

The root of our word happiness is ‘hap’ or chance. We hap upon or chance to encounter things that give us pleasure, so by definition happiness is a chancy proposition. Joy is different. Happiness is what the world briefly gives. Joy, on the other hand, comes from our faith, our trust in God’s purpose and our giving of ourselves to others.

If I say the word, ‘immoral,’ what comes to your mind? Or the word ‘lust’? Perhaps you think of something related to sexual indiscretion. The prophet Amos moves the issue of lust and immorality beyond sex. He condemns those so immersed in commercial interests they ask, “When will the Sabbath be over so that we can return to making our measures small and our profits large? When will the new moon come so that we can start practicing deceit, doctoring the books, swindling the poor again?” (Amos 8:4-6)

Immorality encompasses much more than sexual behavior. Lust really stands for our excessive desire of any kind: for food, drink, pleasure, money. When the self-righteous people come to Jesus with the woman taken in adultery and want him to endorse their stoning her to death, he raises the ante in the encounter: “Whoever is without sin among you, let that one be the first to cast a stone at her.”

When the Methodist movement under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley began in eighteenth-century England, it encountered massive resistance—even to the point of riots against the Wesleys and beatings of them. One such incident occurred in the West Midlands of England in April 1743 when the curate of St. Mary’s Church, Handworth, rode his horse through an audience as John Wesley preached. When Wesley returned in October 1743 a mob showed up at night and ragged him, sometimes “catching me by the hair,” as Wesley put it, from one town to another about two miles away and back in a “heavy rain,” yelling, “Knock his brains out.” It was five hours before Wesley escaped unharmed. He believed that he had been protected by his guardian angel, but his brother Charles more pragmatically concluded that “many blows he escaped” because he was so short.

Whatever explanation you make for God’s providence, we do live, as Martin Luther kept saying, as ‘forgiven sinners.’ But we also live, as John Wesley declared, as those who have received grace and therefore must live faithfully and with purpose.

The actor Billy Bob Thornton was being interviewed several years ago before the Academy Awards presentation. When asked what he would do if he won, Billy Bob replied that he would thank his parents.

“Would you thank God?” asked the reporter.

“No,” he replied. “God has better things to worry about than my Oscar. God isn’t here to help us get Oscars. God is here to be obeyed.”

Amos’ prophecy concludes on a hopeful note:

‘The days are coming,’ says the Lord, when grain will grow faster than it can be harvested, and grapes will grow faster than the wine can be made. The mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills will flow with it. ‘I will bring my people back to their land. They will rebuild their ruined cities and live there; they will plant vineyards and drink the wine; they will plant gardens and eat what they grow. I will plant my people on the land I gave them, and they will not be pulled up against.’ The Lord your God has spoken.

Now, we are called to go forth as those who seek to obey God, as those who are called to make peace, live faithfully, show the Risen Lord to the world and proclaim the Good News.