

## Proper 10, Year C

Amos 7:7-15

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*

Well, a year and a day ago – July 12, 2009, to be exact – I stood here in front of you and got out a plumb line. And here it is, on its anniversary.

Do you all recall what I said last year?

“It is a very old-fashioned (and very good) way of determining what is straight up and down. The string, or line, is attached to a lead weight. The Latin word for lead is *plumbum*. Over the centuries the lead (*plumbum*) began to be called a “plumb-bob” in English. And the string was called a plumb line.

The weight is attracted by gravity and always hangs straight down toward the center of the earth. It provides a “true” vertical line, uninfluenced by its surroundings. If you want a true vertical let the plumb line hang down freely without its touching anything, and it will show you where to begin your building project.”

The reason that Amos the tree-trimmer invoked a plumb line, is that it does not lie. It is “true” because gravity will always pull it in the same direction. Amos was not a practiced prophet, used to spinning words into invocations. He was a man who supplemented his work as a herdsman with some “dressing of sycamores” – the hard trimming of trees and their fig-like fruit each year to encourage fresh growth and a good harvest.

When the Lord spoke to Amos, and showed him a plumb line held against a wall built with a plumb line, there was no variation between them. Both were at the same

angle – true to the center of the earth. So Amos assured his listeners that his words from the Lord God were also “true.”

Jesus did not use a plumb line in his parable about the Good Samaritan, but he invoked the experience of his listeners in determining what was “true.” It was not words, surely, that kept the priest from ministering to the man who had been beaten. No, it was fear of becoming ritually polluted by contact with human blood. And it was not words that kept the Levite from an act of mercy – it was pride that prevented him from putting his humanity above class distinctions.

Jesus depended on the ordinary people in the crowd – like a common law jury – to decide better even than the lawyer who asked the question, to discern what was true. And the truth was clear: it was the Samaritan, a member of a supposedly inferior social class, who was the true human. He alone put shared humanity and human suffering before all the supposed truths of class, religious belief and custom.

What are these truths that, like a plumb line, drive down into the center of our souls? I believe that a community of people who live and work together, who care deeply for and about each other, who know each others’ strengths and weaknesses and show up when the chips are down, also know these deep truths. These are the rock-hard truths that Jesus preached.

This close to our American Independence Day, I think I can quote the words that talk about such shared knowledge. The framers and writers of our Declaration of Independence offered some: ***“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”***

Those are the kind of deep beliefs that the plumb line shows when it is used to measure the hearts of a true community – one that will hang together through thick or thin, which will care for its children and its elderly, and never, ever scapegoat anyone. That's what the story, To Kill a Mockingbird, written fifty years ago this month, is all about. Yes, **that** kind of truth.

And we, at St. Paul's Church, are being invited into a plumb-line moment over the next few weeks, aren't we?

As Nancy, our loved Assistant Rector, prepares to move after seven years' education, work and transformation into the duties she was called by God to perform as Rector of a parish, we as a congregation are being asked about our own core values. She has spent her time learning how to dress sycamore trees, and she has been a shepherd, caring for us in our need, teaching us about Scripture and how we become formed as Christians. She has labored both to serve us and to learn from us. Now it is time for her to be sent out to care for her new flock.

And what of us? What deep truths have we learned from her in the last three years? What plumb-line truths has she witnessed to, by her actions and words? What deep truths might she have learned from us? And how shall we send her out to preach Jesus' words and minister in His name?

It is so easy to fall into the smug trap of thinking that she will leave us, and we have no responsibility for her. Perhaps she was just doing a job? May we realize our sacred responsibilities!

I think that St. Paul's can speak plumb-line truth about the procession of Assistant Rectors we have sent to minister to the larger church. Ted Peterson, Mary Glasspool, Jim

Ransom, Ruth Kirk, Anita Schell-Lambert and Nancy Stroud come quickly to mind: all now are Rectors (and Mary's a Bishop) who have taken up the awesome responsibilities of leading and serving their congregations and the church in these difficult times.

As we count the days before The Reverend Nancy Dilliplane joins these impressive Assistant Rectors who have completed their time of training here at St. Paul's, each of us has an opportunity to ask ourselves about truth.

- What do we understand about ourselves as a congregation?
- How will we serve our community of faith to make it stronger when Nancy is no longer with us to help?
- How should we pray for her as she begins her God-ordained work?
- How will we witness to our common humanity?
- And when will we show up to serve the needy ones in our congregation and community?

Yes, Amos is back with his plumb line. This is a time for seeing whether our walls are square and plumb, our lives securely built on Jesus' teachings. Reach into your hearts during these next few weeks for truth, as I shall reach into mine!

*Amen.*