

Objective measurements

Rev. Jim Cullen – July 11, 2010

In the past 24 hours you have used many different devices to measure something. – a thermometer, a measuring cup, an odometer, perhaps a light meter, a tape measure, a level. Whenever we use as a measuring device, it has meaning only because it is related to some standard of measurement. If you need to purchase 10 metres of rope, you know how long it will be. If it is 35 degrees (like this week) you know that it is very hot outside. Objective measurements bring stability to many parts of our lives. They come from outside ourselves. If we think about this, then we can understand the two lessons we shared this morning.

The OT lesson is from the prophet Amos. Amos was a fruit grower who was called by God to go and challenge the people of Israel. His message was quite devastating. He spoke plainly that their way of life was not acceptable to God. Amos used a vivid image to make his point. The image is simple, a weight tied to a string. A plumb-line was a simple way to make sure that a wall was straight. It made sure that it was perpendicular. ***The Lord is standing beside a wall ... with a plumb line in his hand.*** Amos is offering this image as a warning that there is a moral plumb-line –the ways of God – by which all human thought and action is measured. He says that their society is so corrupt and morally bankrupt that the ***high places shall be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.*** Amaziah, the high priest does not listen to what Amos has to say. He tells him to go home. He rejects Amos. Not so much on moral grounds, but because Amos should not be saying these things ***in the king's sanctuary.*** The words of Amos are a blow to the expectation of a society continued with its injustice.

When we think about this message from Amos we can use his image of the plumb-line. What would it mean to us to apply such a plumb-line to ourselves, to our congregations, to our society? How might we respond when confronted by those things we do not wish to face? Would we respond like Amaziah, refusing to even consider the truth that is spoken?

The question before us this morning is, what would a plumb-line look like for us? There are some who might answer, follow the 10 Commandments, or do what the Bible says, something like that. Sometimes we use the plumb-line that others have created. Understanding what God wants us to do has been reinterpreted over the years. Killing nonbelievers, as was done in the Crusades, is not a good plumb-line. Taking Native children away from their families was not a good plumb-line. There are other plumb-lines that are or were important to families. In my Dad's family, Scottish Presbyterians, there was a strict plumb-line around Sunday. No shining of shoes, no work in the barn other than milking and feeding, no use of horses (they needed rest), no work in the kitchen other than serving what had been prepared the day before, no entertainment (especially cards). Sunday was about worship, rest and family visiting. This plumb-line determined Sunday activities. While it seems strange to us today, it had some very valuable benefits, physical rest, family time and regular worship. It was not a core value of the Christian faith but they believed that it was the right thing to do.

Each of us has some plumb-lines in our lives that may or may not be beneficial, but that are part of who we are. They come to us from our family or our community, from our own growth and maturity. They often change as we experience more and more of life.

The gospel lesson this morning tells its own story. It is a story about establishing a plumb-line. A lawyer asks Jesus, ***What must I do to inherit eternal life?*** Jesus reminds him that he already knows the answer. It is written in the law. The man says, I know, ***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength; and your***

neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, you know the answer. That is what you should do. The man pushes the conversation, ***And who is my neighbor?***

At this point Jesus tells a story. We know the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story speaks for itself. It would, however, been shocking to the first hearers. When a Priest and a Levite – two prominent members of society – people who knew better – pass the injured by, Jesus incurred the anger of the listeners. In addition, when a Samaritan – a foreigner, gives help, Jesus praises a person who would normally be seen as an enemy. When Jesus makes the central character a Samaritan, he extends the concept of neighbor far beyond conventional bounds of social acquaintance. Jesus seems to suggest that true neighborliness is created by reaching beyond people who are familiar to us and make us feel comfortable.

The Samaritan bound up the wounds, took the man to an inn and went even further by accepting future responsibility, promising to pay additional expenses. It is accepting long-term responsibility that deeply challenges us. For Luke, (the writer) and for Luke's church, this story serves as an example of what it means to be God's people – to act in love, love that has no boundaries, and love that expects no recompense. This is Luke's plumb-line.

This is the plumb-line that Jesus offers the lawyer. This story can be our own plumb-line. It is so simple; it is so complex; it is so powerful – the plumb-line that God sets for us to evaluate our own lives. It is all about how we treat each other – our neighbors – those close to us – those different from us - in the short and long time.

Barbara Johnson created this story...

“A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

A subjective person came along and said, “I feel for you down there.”

An objective person came along and said, “It is logical that someone would fall down there.”

A mathematical person calculated how he fell into the pit.

A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit.

A fundamentalist said, “You deserve your pit.”

The tax man wanted to know if the taxes were paid on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, “You haven't seen anything until you have seen my pit.”

An optimist said, “Things could be worst.”

A pessimist said, “They will get worst.”

Jesus saw the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.”

This is our plumb-line.