

Sermon

“Crossing Lines”

July 14, 2013

Luke 10:25-37

Amos 7:7-9, 14-17

Children's time: a plumbline – and the Cross (love God, love neighbor) as Jesus' plumbline for us.

A few years ago when I was reluctant to leave my laptop in my car's back seat, the person I was with chastised me, saying, “Aha, Reverend, I've got you! You're preacher but you don't believe in the goodness of people?”

My response was quick: “Of course not! I've read the Bible. The Bible tells me that people can be pretty cruddy: the first couple ever created couldn't keep just one rule straight; the first two kids ever born were murderer and victim; the first people ever called to be God's people forgot God all the time and even ended up rejecting his Son, Jesus. No, the Bible doesn't say that people are trustworthy or good; the Bible simply says that God loves us in spite of us! And that God doesn't give up hope that we will someday learn to love God and each other.”

We tend to forget God. Our forgetfulness is not so much the kind that happens in a grocery store, when we cannot remember what was on that list we forgot to bring with us, but the kind that makes us forget how much someone has done for us, or forget who it is that really cares about us... or forget our own responsibility for someone else. Throughout the Bible, God's people suffered from these kinds of forgetfulness.

They forgot God's covenant with them: "I shall be your God, you shall be my people." (Lev. 26:12) They forgot that God spoke to them in still, small, unexpected voices, and in many unexpected ways. They forgot that the Lord required of them that they should act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with their Lord (Micah 6:8)...They forgot God's directive that they should care for the fatherless, the widow, the alien in the land...They forgot that God told them to love God (Deut. 6:4-5) and to love their neighbors as much as they did themselves (Lev. 19:18).

The Bible shows God trying, over and over again, to remind the people what their lives were really supposed to be. It was in this spirit that God called a man named Amos. Amos was not a professional prophet, as so many of his day were. He was a layman. He was not trained or put onto a ministerial pension plan... He *was* used by God, sometimes quite uncomfortably.... His message was clear: "You have forgotten to whom you belong. You have forgotten the requirements of your God. You have forgotten that God is greater than any nation, and that God demands righteousness."

In Amos' day God's people were divided into two separate nations, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom). Amos was a southerner, but he felt compelled by God to go to the north and speak as a prophet there. The people up there didn't like what he had to say. This is understandable, for they were in the midst of prosperity. The market was good. Wealthy persons had the luxury of having two homes - one in the city for winter and one in the country for summer. Expensive ivory decorated the houses and furniture. These people lived in comfort, feasting on the tender meat of lambs and drinking wine by the bowlful while harps entertained them.

To a nation whose professional prophets were telling the people just what they wanted to hear, Amos delivered a totally different message. He saw that behind the prosperity of the land a terrible burden was being placed on the poor. They were being cheated out of their land, and they were being robbed by dishonest merchants, the same merchants who looked so pious at the weekly worship services. So Amos announced that God was upset, and that God was going to punish the people. The land would be defeated by an enemy army.

This message made Amos less than popular. When the high priest of the northern kingdom confronted him and told him to shut up, Amos replied: "I am not on anybody's payroll - The true message of God cannot be accountable to any vested interests...I am not here for money; I am here to obey God."

And the memory was pricked by Amos' message: Here was a plumb line. You, Israel, as a nation, as a priesthood, are not measuring up. You have given up your God. You have forgotten your calling. You have given up your life. So now, you face destruction. Amos' life was a plumb line. (pause)

Another plumb-line: Jesus' life, and the story he told of the Good Samaritan. Instead of asking, "Is that person really my responsibility?" the question we ask ought to be, "Is God asking ME to be a neighbor to this person??" Am I living up to Jesus' plumb-line: "Love your neighbor as yourself"?

A Plumb-line. Something to challenge our sense of call by God, something to remind us of God's care. Something to guide our mission. And what is our mission? It is nothing less than to re-present Jesus Christ to the world through our every day lives. This morning I listened to an African American pastor in Sanford, Florida, speak about the message he would share with his congregation today, the morning after the jury decided that George Zimmerman was not guilty of murder or manslaughter in the death of Trayvon Martin. The pastor expressed disappointment in the acquittal, but said that he would counsel his congregation to show respect to all concerned and to hold fast to their first priority, which is that of representing the love of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in this world. I think he got it right: he is holding onto God's plumb line!

So Jesus told the story about the Good Samaritan. Remember what prompted him to tell this story: A lawyer who specialized in the Jewish law came forward to try to trick Jesus. The lawyer came up and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus knew he was a lawyer, so he asked him: "What does the law say?" And the lawyer recited what every good Jew would know: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "That's right," Jesus replied. "If you do this, you shall live." But the lawyer couldn't leave it there: "Just who is my neighbor?" he asked.

At this question, Jesus told the story of the victim on the roadside and those who saw him. And, of course, we know that the one who wanted to trick Jesus ended up having the tables turned on himself... He wanted a line drawn, a boundary defining neighbor and the limits of responsibility.

Instead, Jesus had one who would NEVER have been considered “neighbor” (the hated Samaritan) end up being the one who became a neighbor by caring for one in need.

We all want to draw lines. We want to hear that God expects this from us but not that... “What do I have to do, God, to PASS in this school called life?” We’d like to hear the minimum we must do, and then we’d love to be told that God doesn’t hold us responsible for most of the other needs of the world. Guess what? Jesus, by giving this story, has told us that WE are the ones who must decide, daily, whether we are neighbor. The responsibility is ours...

Were he in Israel walking around today, Jesus would probably tell the “Good Samaritan” story as the “Good Palestinian” story. To us today, it might be the “Good North Korean” or the “Good CEO,” or the “Good Undocumented Worker” story. For those of us who claim that we believe in Jesus and are trying to follow him, Jesus might tell the story as the “Good Muslim,” or the “Responsive Atheist.” He would surely choose somebody who makes us uncomfortable, somebody we want to think of as not as good as we are. Wherever we draw the line...

Several years ago I attended a five-day Disciple Bible study leaders training in Danbury, and ended up getting to know a diverse group of folks. There was an elderly woman in the program who made me mad because she never did her homework. The pages I had worked hours over each night to write down my responses to the assigned readings were always blank when she laid hers out, and this was particularly frustrating since most of the time, she and I were paired as partners to share our insights and the work we had done. I found myself trying to get someone else as my partner, because my anger increased each session, but I was not successful. It wasn’t that this woman had a reading problem: she did not. She read the liturgies and the hymns wonderfully. She just didn’t bother to do the required study preparation. But one session, when we were supposed to share about a particular scripture and what it meant to follow Jesus, this woman looked me in the eye and said, “The Lord has always provided for me. I have known tough times, when I lost a child, when I had no place to live, when I was sick, but I always asked God to help me hold onto my faith in him. And he did. The troubles kept on coming, sometimes nothing seemed to change, but the Lord kept me from losing faith. He can bring a person through anything.”

The line of resentment I had drawn between that woman and myself evaporated. Okay, her approach to the course still bothered me. I honestly believed that my approach was better. But I experienced Jesus through her witness, and that day she became my neighbor, my sister in Christ, one who can teach me. I stepped over the line and now I cherish her instead of resenting her.

In searching for ideas for this sermon, I came across another story of stepping across lines, this one by William Willimon, now a retired Bishop in the UMC. Years ago, “Who is my neighbor” became new and fresh for him through a difficult experience he and his family had while on a mission trip in Nicaragua. Listen to his account:

“Some years ago I was in Nicaragua, part of a group from our church that was visiting members of the Moravian Church on the east coast of Nicaragua. Most of them were Mosquito people,

indigenous people. They were very poor. We had come to help them. We were the powerful people from the north, from America, from the first world.

Our group was mostly young people. It included my two oldest children, two sons, one 21 and one 17. As our time in Nicaragua wore on, it was clear that one of my sons was not well. He became seriously ill. He was, I realized with terror and fright, becoming psychotic, slipping further and further from reality. It proved to be the onset of bipolar illness, or manic depressive disorder. It was all I could do to keep from weeping uncontrollably, I was so upset and frightened.

Whom did I see coming down the road to help? Not first-world doctors. Not American diplomats or embassy officials. Rather, a stranger - actually, a series of strangers. A young, tough Nicaraguan man, illiterate. The kind of guy who rolled his pack of cigarettes up in the arm of his t-shirt, and whose neck sported several gold chains. He was serving as our driver. Eventually, he helped me get my sons back to the States.

Then there was a weird homeopathic physician who looked like a cross between Rasputin and Svengali, whose office lacked the pristine, clinical trappings that we are accustomed to having. He gave us his time and services and asked for no compensation. His father, it turned out, was a pastor. He understood that pastors don't have much money. On the journey home, we might never have made it without the assistance of an airline worker, a woman with big hair, high heels, and a Texas accent, characteristics that challenged all my stereotypes.

All sorts of people that I never would have thought to turn to, to receive help from, did help me. As I struggled to get my son home safely, to get him to medical care, I found myself receiving help and care from people I expected to give help to, not receive it from. I found myself relying on people I would never have expected to know, much less trust.

It wasn't exactly the Samaritan to my Jew, but it was finding myself in need and finding that I was helped, in a way saved, by such unexpected people - people whom, if truth be told, I thought I was better than, above, smarter than and stronger than.

Now, when I hear the story of the Good Samaritan, I do so as a person who has met God in the stranger, in the unexpected person, in an illiterate driver, in an unconventional physician, in an airline employee, and in a score of other people whose help I never expected to need, much less to receive." (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 13-14)

We all draw lines between ourselves and others, boundaries over which we are not so sure we want to step. Jesus would challenge these lines, and ask us to hold before us HIS plumbline, so that, instead of asking "What do I have to do to get into heaven or into God's good graces," we are asking, "To whom am I being called to be neighbor? To whom does God want me to show love? What lines am I being called to step over in the name of Jesus Christ?"

If we ask, we'd better watch out, because God may show us! If so, God will also give us the

strength and power to be neighbor, and as we ARE neighbor, we will find the abundant life that Jesus came to share with us. May it be so. Amen.