

## Parable as Plumb Line

As I was teaching perspective to my drawing students the week I was reading the text from Amos, I used the example of how a plumb line helps us to get the vertical lines straight in a building (of course, we aren't sure about some of our buildings here on Gabriola). The author of Amos used a clever metaphor of the plumb line being a guide for human behaviour, helping us to correct our behaviour by leaning us towards the 'straight and narrow.'

Amos' right behaviour was to criticize the establishment of his day. After being threatened by Amaziah the priest not to prophesy at Bethel because it was the kings' sanctuary, Amos replied saying he was speaking God's words with some of the harshest lines in the bible. Amos (and God) didn't think much of cowering to the King and the Priest! He spoke truth to power, predicting dire consequences to the king and to Israel: your wife shall become a prostitute and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, and more...(hearing those words once today is enough!).

I have to laugh when people believe that we can keep religion separate from politics. I doubt if they have read the bible! One definition of political is "of or relating to the government or public affairs of a country". The psalmist for example this morning in psalm 82 described God as one who held judgment against those in the society of his time who treated the weak and orphans unjustly. I conclude that speaking out against oppressive and corrupt leaders is an important part of God's plumb line.

King Jeroboam, who reigned from 786-746 BC forged a kingdom characterized by territorial expansion, aggressive militarism and unprecedented economic prosperity. Israel's religious leaders

sanctioned the political and economic status quo that exploited the weak. The political and religious leaders were ‘in cahoots’. Enter Amos, with his fiery rhetoric. Describing how the rich crushed the poor, he exposed sexual debauchery, lamented a corrupt legal system, and exposed predatory leaders and religious leaders who aided them.

One can hardly be surprised that Amaziah the priest tried to run Amos out of town! There are many examples in the bible of prophets, including Jesus, challenging the incorrect behaviour of powerful leaders and being persecuted. Thankfully there have been many good religious leaders who followed in the footsteps of Amos.

Oscar Romero for example, even though he began his priesthood as a conservative Catholic, became politicized when he saw the injustices of his government towards the people of El Salvador.

There is a long list of such Christian saints: to name just a few more, Francis of Assisi, Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu. They knew the importance of actions and lifestyle. Dorothy Day, who worked tirelessly for justice, wrote “if we think we can say our private prayers and still genuflect before the self perpetuating unjust systems of this world, our conversion will not go very deep or last very long”. The American Bishops, paraphrasing many recent Papal statements from Pope Francis said that “social justice is an integral part of evangelization, a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel, and an essential part of the church’s mission. Social critique is not an add-on, an option, a choice, or a unique vocation for a few. If Jesus is indeed the ‘Saviour of the world (John 4:42) we must not, we cannot continue to think of salvation as merely a private matter. (from Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, July 7 2016, Center for Action and Contemplation).

But not all of us are called to sainthood. Not all of us have the courage or the ability to be justice-seeking political activists. But we can support those individuals and organizations that do seek justice.

Today's text from Colossians didn't use the metaphor of the plumb line but the apostle Paul did implore his followers at Colossae to (and I quote): "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." Followers of Jesus were implored to do good works. And often, doing good works went against the status quo. For example, even the story of the good Samaritan was a critique of the people in power in Jesus Day.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was a way for Jesus to teach people to act correctly. He told the story to a lawyer who asked him "what must I do to inherit eternal life?". I read that it was common to test speakers by asking a question that might trip them up or show their lack of wisdom. In this case the lawyer might have wanted an answer in correct legalese. To fully appreciate Jesus' parable it helps us to realize that much of Jewish religion of Jesus' day had deteriorated to legalistic ritual.

One of my favourite Christian writers, Frederick Buechner, suggested the lawyer might have wanted an answer such as "A neighbour (herein referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the art of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part....(you get the idea)." Perhaps the lawyer thought he had to follow legalistic rules carefully in order to inherit eternal life.

“Instead of quoting laws, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. In the story, the people who were the powerful of the day, the priest and the Jewish Levite, did not stop to help the man who was beaten and left at the side of the road. It could have been that they would have been considered unclean if they touched the beaten man. They had rules they had to follow. The Samaritan, on the other hand, just did what needed to be done. The Samaritan wasn't Jewish and as a group Samaritans and Jews hated each other.

We don't know if the man who was beaten was a Jew, but if he was, he might have found it difficult to be rescued by a hated Samaritan. The Samaritan, even if he didn't like Jews, didn't let that stop him from helping. By making the hero of his story a Samaritan, Jesus would have challenged the lawyer, most likely Jewish. It could be similar if in our time a story was told in which rather than a Samaritan, a Muslim was the hero rescuing an anti Muslim person. The story has many layers, but most of all, it criticizes people who let their religious and other beliefs prevent them from helping others in need. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan was a very political story, challenging the behaviour of the people of his day!

One of Jesus' most well known parables, like many of his stories, could be seen as acting like plumb lines calling us to right behaviour. Surely we should help anyone who needs us. Jesus taught his followers to love their neighbour as themselves! When we consider some of our neighbours, even many of those to the south of us, (especially in this election year) that is a very tall order!

Do we take Jesus' teaching into account when we make trade agreements with other countries? Did the British people consider

their neighbours when they voted to leave the European Union? Did the US when they built the fence between them and Mexico? Have the countries in Europe flooded by war-fleeing refugees been asking the question: who is my neighbour?

Martin Luther King put it this way, don't ask what the Levite asked "what will happen to me if I stop to help this man? Instead ask "what will happen to him if I don't?

Let us pray: