

**Out of line**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2015.

*Then the Lord said, "See I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people." Amos 7:8*

Amos is an unlikely prophet. He is sheep-farmer with no status in the community and no particular qualifications for the job. He left the relative peace and prosperity of his village of Tekoa in the Judean hills just six miles south of Bethlehem to respond to the call to be a prophet, a spokesman for God. A prophet has to warn people when they are out of line and Amos sees the loosening of moral standards in an age of prosperity and peace. Amos uses the analogy of the plumb line alongside a sagging wall to indicate how far out of line their lives had become. He deplores the corruption in public officials and their exploitation of the poor. He speaks against the ruling class and advocates for the common people living under oppression.

Amos sees the people of the establishment practicing the rituals of their religion with no inner conviction. Their religious observances are devoid of any belief in what they are doing. In short, they are religious but not spiritual. It was in that context that God called Amos to preach against the excesses, and the exploitations of the establishment. It was no easy task. He derived no joy from the role of being a prophet of doom and is bitterly resented for what he has to say. No one wanted to hear that the temple would be destroyed or that the reign of King Jereboam would be annihilated. In his role as a moral conscience and a fierce critic of the power structure he tells them what they needed to hear and they didn't want to hear it. Amos' prophecies were fulfilled when the Assyrians invaded and conquered Israel in the year 722 B.C.

Centuries later, John the Baptist appears as a prophet to urge repentance and to make way for the coming of Christ, the anointed one of God. He is a cousin of Jesus and Biblical scholars tell us that the two of them spent their early years together in the monastic community of Qumran in the southern regions of Palestine near the Dead Sea. He attracts great crowds with his dynamic preaching warning everyone to repent and be prepared for the coming Kingdom of God. When Jesus presents himself to be baptized John is both humbled and reluctant, but Jesus insists to set an example for us.

John is a man of genuine character and humility. He lives a rigorously ascetic life of self-denial. When he attracts his own following John has to make sure that the people don't think that he is the Messiah. John never forgets who he is. He always points beyond himself to Jesus as God's anointed one. When he speaks out against immorality without regard to anyone's status, he does so at his own peril. He denounces Herod Antipas for taking his brother's wife for himself and is thrown into prison. Herod is caught in a bind between the pressure to have John executed and his own belief that John is a good man. Herod lacks the moral courage to prevent the execution.

It takes courage to speak against an unacceptable lifestyle of those who refuse to hear the truth about them selves. Many years ago, a close friend of mine revealed to me that he was having a long-term extramarital affair. He tried to rationalize it by saying that he and his wife had an "open marriage" and wasn't hiding anything from her. I wrestled with saying something or keeping quiet. At the risk of appearing self-righteous, I told him that I couldn't accept what he was doing. As I expected, our friendship faded and there was very little communication after that.

We live in a time of increasing secularism and indifference to religion and morality. Whenever religion is acknowledged, it is often manipulated and exploited for one's own gain. Since the advent of advanced communication, there has been a succession of public officials involved in corrupt politics, financial schemes and scandalous affairs. Some have taken responsibility for their actions while others have denied any wrongdoing. When a scandal breaks out involving public figures, it is painful for their families who have to endure the humiliation of adverse publicity.

A public office is a public trust. Public officials have to take responsibility for their public and private lives in an age when everything is so closely scrutinized. As we approach yet another election season with a large field of candidates, it only takes a few demeaning and inappropriate remarks about ethnic minorities, women, people of color, or the LGBT community to ruin a campaign or career. Many criticisms of our first African American president are racially motivated and we could expect sexist criticisms of a future first woman president.

Abraham Lincoln endured unbelievable ridicule and criticism. He was taunted for his ungainly appearance and emancipating of the slaves. He was sustained in the knowledge that truth is the best vindication against slander. He said that he did the very best he could and in the end if he was right, what was said against him wouldn't amount to anything. If he were wrong, ten angels swearing he was right wouldn't make any difference. It was Mark Twain who said that if you strive to do the right thing, it will gratify some and astonish the rest. In the final analysis, it is more important to be faithful to God than to try to please people.

The challenge of Christian living is to bring out the best in each other. When we see those whose behavior is out of line, encouraging them to redirect their lives is no easy task and may lead to rejection. It is up to any of us to make major changes in our lives. Loving and respecting others as we love and respect ourselves assures us that we are in line with what God wants for us.