

SERMON FOR HANOVER GRACE JULY 10 2022
by Marion Boyd

You may have thought, listening to our Scripture readings for today, that they had no obvious relationship to one another. We are going to look more closely at our readings to see why they might have been chosen together in the Lectionary.

First a little bit of background on the book of Amos, a minor prophet from the 8th century BCE. Amos was a reluctant prophet. Unlike Isaiah, who was a man of the court or Jeremiah, who was a priest, Amos had been a humble herdsman living in Judah when God called him to serve. The task God gave him was to go to Israel, the northern kingdom, to pronounce God's judgment on Israel's rulers and peoples. The disparity between the rich and poor, the powerful and the oppressed, was offensive to God. In Chapter 5 verse 24, the key theme of social justice is clearly stated: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

In the passage Bob read this morning, we get a very clear idea of God's expectations. Amos has a vision of God, standing on a wall holding a plumb line. For those who may not know, a plumb line is a cord with a weight or weights hanging from it. It was used to see if walls were truly vertical, not leaning too far backward or forward, not bulging in on themselves. I can still remember my grandfather, who used lead shot for his weight, and my father, who used fishing line sinkers, holding plumb lines to ensure that the construction of their garden walls was true and straight and strong.

When God holds a plumb line to the people of Israel, he finds them wanting. He sees neither justice nor righteousness in them. God vows that "the high places shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries laid waste" as he wages war against the house of Jeroboam, the King of Israel. The passage continues after our reading as Amos prophesizes that the King will die by the sword and the people of Israel exiled.

Our Gospel reading, the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan, is one of the most read parables Jesus preached. And yet, it is only found in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has been upsetting the Jewish leaders by consorting with tax collectors, welcoming women into his inner circle, eating with Samaritans, and flouting the Sabbath rules. They have commenced a concerted campaign to expose Jesus as a law-breaker and false prophet who is definitely not the promised Messiah. In our passage, a lawyer tries to trip Jesus up by asking what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, using the classic rabbinic method of teachers, answers with a question: "what is written in the law?" The Lawyer tells him: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." Jesus confirms that his answer is correct but tells him "do this and you will live." The lawyer is persistent and seeks to justify himself by asking: "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus then relates the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was about 17 miles in distance and was heavily travelled by people of business, government staff and religious officials. It was an extremely dangerous trip as attacks by bandits were frequent and vicious. It was not surprising to see bodies that had been robbed and beaten, were sometimes alive and often dead. In our passage, a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho had been attacked, badly beaten and robbed of all his possessions, including his clothes. The first passerby is a priest, who sees the man but passes by on the other side, not tending to him at all. Now there are lots of theories about why he didn't stop, including his fear that he would be defiled by touching a non-Jew or might get trapped having to get him buried that day, as required by Jewish custom. For whatever reason, he hurried on, leaving the poor man in the ditch. Similarly, a Levite, who worked in the administration of the Temple, quickly passed over to the other side of the road without offering any assistance.

Then along comes a Samaritan, who on seeing the injured man, is moved by pity. He not only poured out treasured oil and wine on the wounds but bandaged them. He put the man on his own animal, took him to an inn, and nursed him overnight. The Samaritan could not stay until the man was fully healed but he gave sufficient money to the innkeeper to pay for his room and board. He assured the innkeeper that, if there were more expenses, he would pay the bill on his return trip. Jesus challenges the lawyer, "which of these three was a neighbour to the man?" The Lawyer admits it was the one who showed him mercy. Again, Jesus tells him, "Go and do likewise."

As Jesus does throughout the Synoptic Gospels, he stresses again and again that we must act on the Commandment not just recite it by rote. The kicker in the story, of course, is that the person who shows mercy is a Samaritan, part-Jew/part Gentile. Jewish law forbade good Jews from having contact with Samaritans. The Samaritans were reviled by the Jews and one of the major criticisms the Pharisees had of Jesus was that he interacted with them, ate meals with them and generally accepted them as equal human beings. The message is that the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves sees neighbour in a who different way than the Old Testament. In Leviticus, the neighbour was a fellow Jew who adhered to Jewish Law. We never know the background of the injured man, but the priest and the Levite clearly did not recognize him as their neighbour.

The question "who is my neighbour" continues to be a question for our times. As the Epistles demonstrate time and again, our neighbour is all humankind, no matter what race, what religion, what orientation, what language, what relationship we have. It is a struggle for us to envision loving those who bomb and shoot, who rape and pillage as our neighbour. We are not required to love what others do. Even when we are calling people to account for their actions, God still wants us to demonstrate compassion and mercy toward them just as we would expect for ourselves. Even when we are compelled to punish wrongdoing in order to keep our communities safe, we are still called to be compassionate and just in our actions. The endemic anger and calls for

vengeance do not fulfill the love commandment. Love, without action, does not fulfill the love commandment. In this Parable, the Samaritan epitomizes the justice and righteousness he wants for all his people. Jesus tells us, as he did the lawyer, “go and do likewise”

In the Great Commandment as given us by Jesus, we are given a plumbline by which we can measure and test our commitment to righteousness and justice to all our neighbours, lovable or not. Christ demonstrated to us throughout his ministry that love is not just a noun but a verb. We are expected to act out our faith in the real world. This is not an easy task we have been set. It is, as Kierkegaard observed, “the task of a lifetime.” May we be equal to the task. AMEN