

2013 July 14
Amos 7:7-17
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37
“Won’t You Be My Neighbor”

After two hours of meeting, the chair of Committee on Church Growth was ready to call it a night. “Unless anybody has another idea besides calling every service Easter or Christmas,” she said, “I’ll accept a motion to adjourn.”

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, “All things should be done decently and in order.” We Presbyterians took that instruction to heart from the very beginning. And the way that we make sure things are done decently and in order is to make sure that we have plenty of committees. Lots of committees. At one time, at the national level of our denomination, we had a Committee on Committees. I kid you not. I’m not sure exactly what the Committee on Committees did, but it probably had something to do with making sure we had enough committees.

You may know that the schedule of scripture readings that we follow every Sunday was also put together by a committee. The name of that committee is the Consultation on Common Texts. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers had for many years followed a prescribed schedule of scripture readings leading into the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960’s. Due to the new openness that came from Vatican II, many other denominations began to consider the value of a common schedule of scripture readings. Thus the Consultation on Common Texts was born.

Over quite a few years representatives from the Catholic Church and many others sat down and ironed out a schedule that leads their preachers through a program of recommended readings. Every Sunday there is a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, the New Testament Letters, and the Gospels. Every three years the reading cycle starts over, and during those three years congregations will be exposed to a large portion of the Bible.

We here at Community Presbyterian Church also follow what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary. The practice of following a recommended scripture reading schedule has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that preachers can’t avoid texts that are difficult to interpret or difficult to put into practice, as much as they would like to do so. Another advantage is that you don’t have to hear sermons on the preacher’s favorite passages time after time. A third advantage is that many of our Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian, and other sisters and brothers across the world are today hearing exactly the same readings that you have heard.

So it is that the passages you heard today and last week and the week before that, and at least for the last four years, have come from the Revised Common Lectionary, that prescribed list of readings put together by a committee, covering a large part of the Bible, and (I believe) constructed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Today we have a reading from the prophet Amos. Poor Amos. He would much rather be tending his flocks and pruning his sycamore trees, but the Lord spoke to him and told him to go prophecy to the people of Israel. Amos knows that you can’t fight the Lord, so he becomes a prophet.

A prophet is not really primarily one who foretells the future. A prophet is someone who brings a message from the Lord, and in the record of prophetic readings that we have in our Bible, that message almost always takes the form: "Straighten up! Or the Lord will punish you for your sin!" That's exactly the message that Amos has to deliver.

The word that Amos receives from the Lord is especially concerned about the injustice that the rich and powerful are practicing toward the poor and powerless in Israel. In chapter 8 he writes,

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
You who practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals.

You find that kind of message everywhere in Amos. That kind of behavior, of course, violates the instruction given to the people of Israel in the 19th chapter of Leviticus, the one that says they are to love their neighbor as they love themselves. The people of Israel had forgotten, or neglected, that essential commandment.

So Amos preaches a message of God's wrath. He uses the image of a plumb line, which is simply a weight attached to a string. The plumb line is held next to a wall as it is being built to make sure that it is straight. In Amos's vision the Lord is holding a plumb line next to a wall that represents Israel, and sure enough, the nation is not straight. Because of the injustice it is practicing, it is decidedly crooked. And because the nation has failed to care for the powerless and poor, they will be set upon by foreign armies and their sanctuaries and holy places will be torn down.

Now the priest of Bethel is a man by the name of Amaziah, who is a friend of King Jeroboam, and who, you can be sure, is in the practice of telling the king only what he wants to hear. When Amaziah becomes aware of what Amos is saying, he immediately runs and tells the king. Then he goes to Amos and tells him to leave Israel: his message is not welcome there.

In righteous anger Amos rises up against Amaziah, telling him that he, Amos, is not a prophet, but just a shepherd and one who cares for sycamore trees. He would love to go back to herding and farming, but the Lord called him to deliver his dire message to Israel, and he has no other course. After a really harsh prediction for Amaziah and his family, Amos tells him that not only will Israel be attacked by a foreign army, but that army will conquer the nation, and many of its people will be carried off into exile.

And that's exactly what happens. Within about 50 years or so, Israel is finally overrun by the Assyrians, after a long period of serving as a vassal state. A large fraction of the people of Israel are indeed carried off into exile, the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel. And furthermore, the Assyrians bring people of other nations into the land of Israel to intermarry and mix with the Israelites remaining. You see, the Assyrians and many other world powers of that time had discovered that one good way to prevent a conquered people from rising up in rebellion is to scatter them, and to mix them with people from other places.

The remaining Israelites did indeed intermarry with the foreigners. Their descendents became known as Samaritans, because they lived in the area north of Jerusalem known as Samaria.

Among many other roles that Jesus adopted, one of them was prophet. Being God himself, he delivered the word of God to the people of his time, mostly his own people, the Jews. Most often he strove to straighten out misconceptions about God and God's plans for his people, but often he would also deliver a message that was hard for his people to grasp, and even harder for them to live. Such is the case when this lawyer stands up to test him one day.

The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to ensure that he will have eternal life. Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer. "What is in the law? What do you read there?" Amazingly, the lawyer gets it right: We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we are to love our neighbor like we love ourselves. The lawyer is here quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Jesus says to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live." But remember the lawyer is really out to test Jesus. "But who is my neighbor?" he asks. Jesus replies with the well-known story of the Good Samaritan.

It is worthwhile to diverge for just a minute here to talk about that word, "neighbor." What did that word mean to the Jews of Jesus' time? In its original context in Leviticus, it is clear that one's neighbors include those who are poor, alien, laborers, the deaf, and the blind, because they are mentioned explicitly in the verses surrounding Leviticus 19:18. The word in Greek is "plesion," and it seems to have the meaning, in Jesus' time, of one who is related in some way, one who is not a stranger or different, but one who is rather like a kinsman. So neighbors for us would be members of our church, friends, relatives, members of our social clubs, and so on. But also those around us in need.

A man on the road is beaten by thieves and left for dead. Both a priest and a Levite (that is, one who assists the priests in the temple), see the man lying by the side of the road, but they continue on their way without bothering to stop. But a Samaritan comes along, demonstrates compassion, and cares for the man. The Samaritan dresses his wounds, takes him to an inn where he cares for him, and gives the innkeeper money so that the man may stay there until he is well enough to leave.

You remember the Samaritans and how they were despised by the Jews. Half-breeds. No longer really sons and daughters of Abraham, because they had not maintained their racial purity. They had intermarried with Gentiles, over centuries. They rejected all but the Law of Moses as sacred scripture. Thus the psalms and prophets and other writings were not read by Samaritans. They refused to worship in Jerusalem, the holy city chosen by God, but instead worshiped on Mount Gerazim. Over the centuries they had often sided with the enemies of the Jews, such was the degree of antagonism between the two races.

The Jews despised them. They would avoid traveling through Samaria if they possibly could, going many miles out of their way in traveling from Galilee to Judea. Most Jews would have nothing to do with a Samaritan. Jesus did, however. Read John, chapter 4.

Jesus says to the lawyer, which one of these three men, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, proved to be a neighbor to the injured man? The lawyer replies, the one who showed him mercy. Jesus says in turn, "Go, and do likewise."

You know, this story would be so much more straightforward if the injured man was the Samaritan, and the one who helped him was the Jew. Because then those who were hearing Jesus' exchange with the lawyer, and the lawyer himself, could identify with the Jew. But Jesus

doesn't make it easy for the lawyer or for us. He puts a twist in the story, and that twist makes all the difference.

Who is the neighbor? The Samaritan. The one who stops to help. Not the religious men who are too busy, or who don't want to be bothered. The despised Samaritan. We shouldn't be too hard on the priest and the Levite. They may have thought the man to be dead, and didn't want to risk ritual defilement by touching the body. Or maybe the body could be a plant by the robbers who would be in hiding nearby, waiting for a well-intentioned soul to stop and try to help, only to be accosted themselves.

Anyway, the first answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is: the one who takes the time, and maybe the expense, to offer you aid.

But because of the twist, there's another answer. Our neighbor is also the one who needs the aid we can offer.

And then there's the third, and difficult, answer. Our neighbor is the one we most despise. Our neighbor is the one who is totally different from us, totally other from us.

Who is my neighbor? The one who needs my help. Who is my neighbor? The one who helps me. Who is my neighbor? The one who is not at all like me, and maybe even the one toward whom I bear distrust or animosity. These are all my neighbors.

What does Jesus say to do? Love them. Agape love, of course. Love that is demonstrated in word and deed. Tangible love.

Go, and do likewise, Jesus says. Go, and love like the Samaritan.