

July 14, 2024

Sermon Title: “When Things Don’t Quite Measure Up”

Scripture: Amos 7:7-15

Theme: Adaptability is important in serving others.

While I was working on my bachelor’s degree many years ago, at the University of Oklahoma, I would spend my summers in Dallas, Texas, working for Forrest & Cotton, Engineering as a member of the Survey Crew; the same company my brother worked for as a highway engineer. The three summers I spent on the Survey Crew strengthened me emotionally and physically. In those days, we measured distances with a measuring chain; we would draw the 100’ chain tight and level between two points on the ground and then place a wooden stake at exactly 100 feet distant from the previous wooden stake. Sometimes, we would use a plumb bob and hover it over a point on the wooden stake to be as accurate as possible. At the end of my third summer, they began using lasers to measure distances more accurately than the chain could measure. When we were measuring, we would always check the distances we measured on the ground against the distances the engineers had plotted on their maps. When we would find a significant difference between our measurements and those on the maps, we would make sure our distances were correct and then write an equation on the engineer’s map to show the engineer that his or her map needed correction. Occasionally, the engineer might be off by several hundred feet, believe it or not. But, then, that is why the Survey Crew existed, to cross-check the computers that plotted the maps from the engineer’s calculations. Our Survey Crew also ran levels from time to time, measuring the elevation of the land against known elevation points established by the Corp of Engineers. And, occasionally, we would survey property lines as well. In all cases, we would do a surveyor’s report to establish a foundation on which to develop buildings, highway and ground drainage designs.

Surveying is actually one of the oldest professions recorded in history, reaching back in time some 6,000 years. The Egyptians built the Giza Pyramid around 2700 BCE on a nearly perfect square with north-south orientation using surveying techniques of their time. Surveying, however, is not always identified with accuracy. The history of the four-corners area in our desert Southwest (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona) is full of stories about how the early surveyors got the measurements wrong, and the numbers just did not add up, the most famous of these being the Ehad Darling survey of 1868.

Strangely enough, in the history and herstory of science, it is a general rule that when things do not quite measure up, some important discovery is waiting to be

found. When Nicolaus Copernicus, based on the work of Tycho Brahe, and modified later by Johannes Kepler, found that the astronomical numbers did not quite match up, he discovered something underneath the variations of the numbers, that the Sun did not revolve around the Earth, but that the Earth revolved around the Sun. His ideas as modified by Kepler, laid out the numbers in such a way that the orbits were not circular, but elliptical. Perhaps nothing has changed our world of understanding quite like this hard-won discovery, for which many suffered much, and even persecuted by the church of that time.

In my early years studying mathematics, specifically geometry, at the University of Oklahoma, I had the very mistaken idea that I could somehow check my work by measuring the geometric shapes and figures I had drawn. In my mind, I was trying to use the same skills I used in trigonometry to measure an angle or slope applying it to geometry instead. I was soon disillusioned and dissuaded from such attempts by my professor; my attempts at measurement in geometry were misguided. I remembered back to my high school physics class where my teacher had taught me to calmly accept what seemed, at the time, to be a lack of precision when I used the slide rule to quickly calculate my answers on tests. Knowing how to arrive at the answer was more important than the precision of the answer. In other words, my teachers and professors were teaching me NOT to be all that concerned when things did not quite measure up to my childhood standards.

And, I applied these lessons to what I call the arithmetic of the Bible, finally understanding that not all numbers needed to add up precisely, such as, for instance, the number of years between kings or the number of years between one generation and another. The stories could still hold truth even though the numbers inside the stories did not add up by modern standards. And, learning from these stories does not require that they be precise. There are, in fact, other poetic measurements that are much more important. I learned about these poetic measurements from my Poet-Laureate Father, combining these with what I knew about the multi-truth nature of the First Testament, that the more perspectives that can be provided in the Scriptures, the better they are, adding truth from the variety of each perspective. This is the Socratic notion at work in me ... that the more I knew, the less I really knew, realizing that there is more in the universe that humans do not know, and cannot explain, that what we do know, or can explain. When we are stewards of the divine mystery, we are acknowledging that things often do not quite measure up to our expectations. Where they do not measure up, there is great possibility!

And then, there is the question: “What do we do when things do not quite measure

up?” Do we double down, cut off the end, and force the measurement to our satisfaction? Do we give up and go to plan B instead? Do we decide to live within the bounds of what we have? When things do not quite measure up, is our answer a grace that ignores failure? Perhaps better, a grace that embraces failure to find possibility! Perhaps a grace that values appreciative inquiry, where together we list what we are doing right with an eye toward enhancing those strengths.

Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) identifies four (4) leadership competencies; diagnosing the situation, managing self, energizing others, and intervening successfully. The most critical of these is diagnosis, where it is important to distinguish between technical and adaptive work. Each leadership situation calls for determining where an expert is needed to solve a technical problem, or where adaptive work (adaptability) is needed, focused on hearts and values. KLC informs us that treating the adaptive as if it were technical just makes things worse. In other words, when things don't quite measure up with a technical solution, we need to be able to work adaptively as a group.

- 1) If there is no clear solution, we need to be ready to listen and learn from multiple perspectives what is needed.
- 2) In adaptive situations, authority and expertise are not enough; we need all the right stakeholders engaged and ready to exercise leadership.
- 3) With adaptive work, we need curiosity and experimentation to inform our path forward.
- 4) When things do not quite measure up, we need to appreciate that we will need more time (group time) on the issue, with a great deal of patience and a strong sense of purpose.

We have a clue as to adaptive work and technical work when we find that things do not quite measure up technically. And so, in referring back to our Scripture for today, we should consider that the Prophet Amos is engaged with God in identifying technical and adaptive work for the people of Israel. The vision of the plumb line is a symbol of that process of determination. Where shall we draw the line between technical and adaptive?

As far as lines go, the Prophet Amos draws our attention to a plumb line, a very straight and vertical line defined by the earth's gravity. Surveyors use a tool called a 'plumb bob' tied to a string to get a closer measurement of distance, dropping the string across the measuring chain and allowing the point on the plumb bob to dangle freely and then come to rest over the land being measured at a single point on the surface. Masons (Brick layers) in ancient times might also have used the

plumb line (or a trowel) against a wall as they built it, somewhat like a carpenter today uses a bubble-level to determine straightness. We know the prophet Amos to be a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, yet his experience must have included masonry or engineering somewhere in his life, as he knows well the image of the plumb line and what it represents. “The Lord says, See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will no longer plaster over what they have done.” (Amos 7:7-8) Hear this, O people of God, when God’s measuring line is straight, we will no longer trample on the needy, or bring ruin to the poor; we will no longer make the ephah small or the shekel great, or practice deceit with false weights on false scales, we will no longer exchange the needy for a pair of sandals. No wonder we are told that the “land could not bear all the words” of Amos (7:10); especially when “justice is the measuring line and righteousness the level.” (Is. 28:17).

For Amos, the gateway to life is straight and narrow, and few ever find it, especially those eager to be rich, and often among those who “pierce themselves with many pains” in order to achieve it. This is where the people have misidentified the work ahead of them as technical rather than adaptive, where they skip over the critical work that needs to be done in their eagerness to be rich and find success.

“Do not set your hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on the God who richly provides ... be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up the treasure of a good foundation for the future ... to take hold of the life that really is life.” (1 Tim. 6:9, 17-18)

Cancel your covenant with death! Make a covenant with life! Call out justice and righteousness to a people yet unborn, a generation yet to take shape. Let them know what justice looks like in their time. Warn them about practicing deceit with false balances, using dishonest scales and inaccurate weights (Prov. 11:1), trampling on the needy for a pair of sandals, bringing the poor to ruin (Amos 8:4-6). Make it clear to those who never knew their legacy, that you were once called “Not My People,” but now you will be called “daughters and sons of the living God (Hos. 1:10),” because you have been called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, once you had not received mercy, but now you have (1 Pet. 2:10).”

God makes God’s appeal for friendship, for reconciliation, through us. God’s hands are our hands; God’s words come through our lips. Reconciliation is born through us and in us. We make friends by not being afraid to reach out our hands.

When we renew friendship, we ask ‘what parts of our relationship need to be taken care of.’ It’s unbelievable that God could do that for us, ‘to be the sin for us,’ to redeem the unredeemed, to give up an only child, to win other children yet unknown. We put a weight on the scales, or we take a weight off the scales, so that they will balance. We are made righteous through Christ; our living is reset so that we no longer live for ourselves alone, but for Christ. We are transfer, translated, moved to the righteous side of the equation. We are reconciled to a balance! God will clean up something we missed or balance our books, or as they say in surveying parlance, to bring our maps into compliance with the ground we have surveyed. From a human point of view, we reconcile our books, with an audit trail, subtracting one side and adding to the other, sometimes with a narrative transaction that can be audited on each side of the equation. From a divine point of view, we reconcile our maps, our accounting books, by equating what is not equal.

Do you remember the old hymn of the church written by Isaac Watts in 1707: When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of Glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. ...Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. ” When we survey the wondrous cross, we take its measurements and critical dimensions, and from those we lay a foundation on which to build our lives. And, it is not something we do alone, but in the community of faith, as the Body of Christ! Alleluia! Amen.