

Amos was a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees. We can figure out what a herdsman does, but I'm completely baffled about how or why a person dresses sycamore trees. It doesn't matter, though; the only reason his occupation has any bearing is that Amos was a simple man, doing simple work. He's been called a "theological amateur," and yet God enlisted him to speak in God's behalf. God showed Amos a plumb line, an ancient tool we may not be familiar with unless we've been involved in constructing something or hanging wallpaper. Nowadays people often use a laser rather than a plumb line, but the purpose is the same: to mark a straight line that becomes a guide for whatever we are doing. It's especially helpful when an existing wall is faulty and therefore cannot be used as an accurate guide on its own. The story of Amos is important in its own right, but today, paired with Luke's story of the Good Samaritan, I believe we can find value in both the work and words of this "minor" prophet and the plumb line God showed him as Amos was sent to speak to the people of Israel.

Today, sadly, is one of those rare occasions when the lectionary scriptures fit all too well with current events. The parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus' way of answering the lawyer's question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer answers him with words we know as the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." That is such a hard teaching! Often we don't even know our neighbors, and when we do, there's a good chance we don't like them, so how are we to love them? The lawyer's next question is the one he hopes will give him an "out," an exception to this hard teaching. Who is my neighbor? The relevance of that question has not diminished over the years, and surely it's obvious to all of us that its answer is not one Christians can turn away from. Our neighbors are not only those who live near us, or even those who are like us—everyone is our neighbor.

Interpreters generally agree that the road being traveled in the parable was a dangerous road. The man who is traveling alone on this road is believed to have been a Jew, as are the priest and Levite who pass him by. In fact, because of the locale, most scholars assume that the robbers are also Jewish. By all accounts and assumptions it is an homogenous situation, or at least it begins that way. Jesus doesn't say why the priest and Levite didn't stop to help the badly beaten man; and it seems to go against what we would expect of religious folks. There *are* possible explanations, such as the restrictions of the purity code, and it's possible they thought the man was already dead and nothing more could be done for him. Then here comes the Samaritan, who doesn't seem to hesitate to stop and help. We really don't know much about the Samaritans except that they didn't share things in common with the Jews. So that means an outsider is helping after insiders crossed to the other side of the road and kept going.

We cannot deny that we live in a world where people are categorized and labeled in ways that make them either insiders or outsiders. If we pay attention to scripture and history, we know it's been this way for a long, long time. We do it, too, this labeling of others, even though we know it's not the way Christ intends us to live; we almost always do it without thinking of the implications of our words and actions. We have created for ourselves a culture of dislike, distrust, and disagreement that has resulted in a universal atmosphere of fear, paranoia, and hatred. We have not learned from the patterns of history; nor have we taken to heart the teachings of our Lord, teachings about love, not hate. Our world is paying for it.

Like so many of you I am heartsick about the violent deaths of those who have been in the news this week, as well as many others who are unknown except to those close to them. I've barely begun to process my own feelings and yet, like Amos and others before him, I've been charged to deliver to you the Word of the Lord. That Word is that we are all created in the image of God, none better or worse than any other. What we are mourning today is racism and there's no doubt that we

have much work left to do before we can say we live in a world of equality. But surely there are other areas of our common lives that have added fuel to the fire of racism and today I'm feeling compelled to be specific with you about how we might be the change we seek in the world, as that saying goes.

At the top of my list is social media, which I believe has widened our isolation and separation from one another. It convinces us that no one will be impacted by the words we share, words that are often hateful, rude, and unkind. Social media affirms our attitude of self-righteousness toward anyone who disagrees with us. Just because I disagree with you doesn't mean I'm a bad person, or that I won't be affected by what you say or how you say it. If I have the courage to voice my disagreement, please engage with me in civil conversation instead of becoming angry and defensive. I want to know why you feel the way you do, and I hope you want to know the same about me. Maybe we can educate each other. This particularly applies to politics and other "hot button issues" that don't even need to be named at this moment. When someone makes racist comments, or comments that are hateful and denigrating, I encourage you to voice your objection, and if you don't object, come see me. We need to talk.

Consider the difference between respond and react; one is much kinder than the other. If you're spending more time studying and discussing another religion or an ideology that offends you than you are in studying and discussing your own, ask yourself how this is helping you or anyone else. If you're not spending time learning about God in Christ and how you may become a better Christian, consider whether or not you're growing spiritually. If you *are* seeking to walk in Jesus' Way, after you study and pray about it get up and do what you've learned to do. If you are irregular in your attendance in worship and fellowship with your community of faith, ask yourself why that isn't important to you. Pray every day for peace—for yourself and for your neighbor—and listen for God's response to your prayer. I could go on, but what I really want you to consider is how *you* are being called to change our world and what is preventing you from doing it.

My friend the Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton writes about a KKK rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan about twenty years ago. "As you can imagine, this very liberal, progressive, university town was not particularly welcoming to the Klan, and many protesters hit the street to make their displeasure known. There were police lining the parade route, a barrier was put up to separate the protesters from the marchers, and the anti-Klan folk far outnumbered both the Klansmen and their hangers-on. In the midst of the activities one of those hangers-on, a man with a confederate flag tee-shirt and a Nazi SS tattoo found himself on the wrong side of the police line and the barrier—he had stumbled into the midst of the protesters. And they turned on him, started pushing and punching; he ran, they chased; he fell and they pounced. Amid shouts of "kill the Nazi," they began to beat him with the sticks holding their placards.

"In the midst of all of this, Keisha Thomas, an 18 year-old black girl, leapt out from the crowd and spread herself on top of the man, shouting out, 'This isn't right, this isn't right.' And the sight of this fierce and insistent black teenager protecting a middle-aged white racist man stopped that crowd in their tracks. Keisha was not hurt and the man himself got up and left without saying a word, but a year or so later a young white man approached her and hesitantly said, 'Thank you—you saved my father's life.'"

Every one of us is connected to one another. The evidence of this is not only spiritual, it's also scientific. Everything we do and say has an effect on others, sometimes as a ripple on a lake, sometimes as a raging river. Our connection to God and each other and our love for God and each other, give us a plumb line to measure and guide the whole of our lives. Remember to use it.

Let us pray: Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving spirit may so move every human heart, and especially the hearts of the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*