

What is Your Plumb Line?

[Amos 7:7-11, 14-15](#)

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A man called "the world's moral compass" died on July 2nd. His name was Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor and author. Well into his eighties, Wiesel spoke out against "indifference as the epitome of evil" (<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865657466/Elie-Wiesel-Holocaust-survivor-and-teacher-of-tolerance-is-dead-at-87.html?pg=all>). This week in a statement reacting to the news of his death, President Obama said that Wiesel was "one of the great moral voices of our time." Wiesel was only 15 when, as a Jew, he was imprisoned in the holocaust at Auschwitz. He lost his mother and younger sister at that death camp, and then he and his father were taken to Buchenwald. His father died there. In 1945 Allied troops liberated the concentration camp, and Wiesel went to Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne and became a journalist and writer. His first of nearly 30 books was *La Nuit*, a memoir of his experience in the death camps. He continued to speak out against other evils of the world: the treatment of black people in South Africa, the genocides in Armenia and in Sudan, the plight of Cambodian refugees, and victims of famine and injustice around the globe. People called him a "messenger to mankind." And as winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he spoke out. As professor at Boston University and as political activist, Wiesel spoke out.

This is what a prophet does. A prophet voices the pain and suffering of the world. Prophets listen to God's voice from a divine context and convey God's words to the people in their human and social context. In that sense, they are messengers to humankind from God. And yet, as Abraham Heschel so eloquently states, "The prophet should not be regarded as an ambassador who must be dispassionate in order to be effective...The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos....The prophet lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God. The prophet hears God's voice and feels [God's] heart" (*The Prophets*, 26).

Amos was such a prophet. He was not the very first prophet of the Hebrew Bible; Moses was the first great prophet and liberator of the people. Then came Elijah whose feeding and healing miracles were replicated in the ministry of Jesus. It was Elijah who called God forth, when the followers of Baal could get no rise out of their god—as in the song from "Elijah" that Steve sang today. And it was Elijah, the Prophet, who passed the mantle to Elisha, his successor.

And then we have a group of prophets beginning with Amos who lived starting from the 8th century B.C.E. Amos was "a shepherd and a trimmer of sycamore trees." Like so many prophets, he did not see himself as a prophet, and yet God sent him from the Southern Kingdom to the Northern Kingdom to be God's conscience among the people. God showed Amos a series of visions. In our reading today, God showed him a plumb line hanging by a wall. And God said this was to be a figurative plumb line that Amos was to take to the people, to hold the people accountable and get the people back in line, since they had fallen

this way and that way to sin. Amos said that the people of Israel in the North would die by the sword, that the people would lose their land, and that the shrines and holy places would be laid waste. Without God's conscience as a plumb line, the people would perish.

So what had the people done that was so bad? "When Amos appeared in the North, there was pride, plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory, gorgeous couches with damask pillows, on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils; their women were addicted to wine, and Amos called them 'fat cows.' At the same time, there was no justice in the land, the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery, and the judges were corrupt" (Heschel, 27-28). The people had become indifferent to evil. They had become rich, and they had developed a sense of entitlement. In fact, they felt they had been chosen to be God's people, and that made them a little pompous, like they were God's favored ones. Amos makes it clear that being God's chosen people is not without responsibility. The plumb line is the reminder that with God's grace comes the ethic to care about others. That ethic is spelled out in the Torah, and restated in all world religions as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

John Wesley said it this way: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." This statement has been condensed in the Three Simple Rules of the church: "Do good, do no harm, and stay in love with God" (Rueben P. Job, 2009). We are asked to lead a disciplined life. The Methodists took these rules so seriously, so methodically, that they were called "Methodists." We live by a standard, by a plumb line. What is that plumb line for you?

One Sunday a couple of weeks ago, an usher found a prayer request slip on the floor and put it in my box in the office. It was written in pencil by a young child and said, "I pray that the Jesus will always be with me." I think this child had it pretty clear.

The presence of Christ—or the presence of God—is a reminder that we are to be responsible human beings. How we need the presence of Christ today!

This week—once again—we are stunned by gun violence and racial violence. Five police officers in Dallas were gunned down and killed on Thursday; seven more were wounded, during a protest over the killing of black men by white police officers in Louisiana and Minnesota. The police in Dallas died protecting a march protesting police violence. Where is our common ethic to do good and to treat one another with kindness and respect? Where is love of neighbor?

The prophets in the Bible and in today's modern world are those who care first about others. Many have called Martin Luther King, Jr. a prophet. He cared about the suffering of his people. He cared with the heart of God. It was a matter of faith for him to write to the white ministers in Birmingham, Alabama from his jail cell in 1963 and say, "Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than

dialogue.... Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.... In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church....I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect" (https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

What is your plumb line? Is it the U. S. Constitution, or an even higher ethic? Is it the Golden Rule? Is it Three Simple Rules: "Do good. Do no harm. [And] stay in love with God." Is your plumb line "the Jesus," like the child who somehow had been taught that Jesus stands for everything right? Perhaps this is a time to ask ourselves, "Are we living the ethic of love? Are we spending our time and our money on things that bring about more love in our families and in our communities?"

In July and August we will be looking at how the prophets hold us accountable to the principle of love. Before you, you see Joanne's portrayal of four great prophets: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Each had a special relationship with the God of love. Each voiced condemnation for humanity's failure to put into practice that principle of love.

May the prophets of today find their voices.