

Today's message is based on the text from the Prophet Amos. In a vision, he saw God standing next to a wall. God was holding a plumb line in his hand. God asked Amos what he saw; he said it was a plumb line. God then said he wanted Amos to go prophesy to the Israelite people.

We have at least two people in the congregation who know what a plumb line is – they are both architects. A plumb line is an ancient tool for finding a true, straight up and down line. It is a string with a rock tied at the bottom. Holding it still off the ground, you will see a straight up and down line. If you place the plumb line on a wall, with a nail, and then hold the rock with your foot (without moving it) if you place chalk on the string and pull it back and release it like the bow of an arrow, a perfectly straight line will be marked on the wall. From there, if you have a 90 degree measure tool, you can make a perfectly straight horizontal line (or you can make a 45 degree angle or other degrees based on the plumb line). Ancient architecture relied on the plumb line. Walls, fences and buildings all had to be straight up and down or they risked falling over because of their own weight.

You might wonder, what did God mean in the vision with the plumb line. First, God was standing next to a wall and God showed Amos the wall was “plumb” or “true”, as in, it was straight up and down and would not collapse. That is an allegory for the so-called “upright” person – someone who was right, or true with God. In the book of Psalms, the upright are people who follow God's laws. The not-upright-people are destined for a fall or, allegorically speaking, they are destined for ruin. This has nothing to do with posture or aging (which makes it more difficult to stand upright). It is all about those “upright” individuals who follow the narrow and sometimes difficult path of God. Metaphorically speaking, it is easy to see the upright person in a crowd of those who are not standing upright. That is how God sees human kind – God can see who is plumb, or true, and those who are not.

Let's take a look at the plumb line through a variety of concentric circles. First is the internal and individual plumb line. How are we standing upright by following God? In a Christian context, our plumb line is this: love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength; and, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's the plumb line. When constructing a fence, one uses a plumb line often to make sure the post is true in the ground. When it's not (let's face it, the post is generally never plumb without some work), the builder will make adjustments until it is true (or plumb). That's how it is with us. We know the straight up and down line is loving God and loving our neighbor. It's hard to do and we often need adjustments; but, we use the plumb line to measure ourselves against the law of God and make corresponding adjustments. So, the first circle is the individual plumb line. The second concentric circle is the plumb line of the family. Is your family plumb or true? When it's not, the family makes adjustments. The next circle is community – is your community plumb or true. And the last circle is the nation – is your nation plumb or true with God? Those circles – individual, family, community and nation – is how the spiritual plumb line of God works. One cannot change the nation without first changing the individual, then the family, then the communities that make up the nation. Amos the prophet was called to use the plumb line to

evaluate the nation, but his message would first be to adjust the individual, then family, then community.

That structure and flow was the same in Amos' day as it is in ours. Amos is asking us to be like a fence builder and evaluate God's plumb line and our own uprightness; and then to make necessary adjustments.

I know a finish carpenter. He is a friend in San Diego. When I asked him, Mark, about his profession – and what the difference is between a carpenter and a finish carpenter – he said that a good finish carpenter earns as much as a medical doctor (but with no retirement or pension), they fix the mistakes of carpenters and, most importantly (and realistically) they make a good room look excellent. He and I were having lunch one day and he needed to stop by one of his projects. It was on the top floor of a high rise building in downtown San Diego. The condo's footprint took up half of the roof. It had a view from Balboa Park to downtown to the Pacific Ocean. Mark's specialty is hanging doors, or, as he calls it, fixing poorly hanged doors. The condo he showed me has a magnificent, hand carved front door. Although it was heavy, he set it so that it could easily swing open and close. He told me a story about it. The carpenter had cut the hole for the front entrance door; but, the carpenter cut the hole by sight, not by a plumb line. Mark easily fixed it and then hung the door and installed the door frame. He stood back and looked at his finished project. Then he noticed a problem. The built in cabinet to the left of the door was installed using the lines from the doorway – it was not plumb. Mark has an excellent eye for these things but he pulled out his plumb line just to make sure; and he was right, the cabinets were not straight up and down. He told me he had a choice and decided to go about it the right way. He called the owners and asked them to meet him in their condo. They walked in and asked them what they thought of the door. They LOVED it. He asked about the cabinets; they liked them too. He said, "If you like it, that's fine, there's nothing more to see. But, if I point something out to you, you'll never look at this wall again in the same way." The thought about it and asked him to show them the problem. He pulled out his simple plumb line and showed them the doorway. It was straight up and down. He brought the plumb line to the cabinets and that's when they saw the mistake. Just to prove it to them, he put a marble on one of the shelves and started to roll to the right. They sighed and said, "How much is this going to cost us..." Mark ended up repairing the whole room by making it plumb.

A simple use of a plumb line by the carpenter with the doorway or the carpenter with the cabinets would have shown what adjustment needed to be made. Again, no one is perfect; spiritually speaking, it is difficult to love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. But, from time to time, it's important to take a look at our own individual plumb line. It can save us from costly adjustments in the future, metaphorically and spiritually speaking.

Amos was quoted with saying that he's no prophet, nor is he a son of a prophet; he is a herdsman and an arborist (a tender of sycamore fruit). This could be a phrase showing humility – the poor often would find sycamore trees as their only source of food. It could also mean something else. It is believed that a sheep will enter a pen if the gate posts are plumb. If they are askew, it causes stress to the animal (or they won't enter). It may have something to do with fear of a fence falling on them. As a shepherd, Amos would have known how to use a plumb line to make sure the gate posts were straight up and down. Likewise, with the gate, it has to be plumb or it will

either swing open or closed. Secondly, to care for trees, it's best if the sapling is plumb. If a tree is planted and is askew, it runs the risk of falling over from its own weight. This means Amos understood what a plumb line is for and what it means for God's creation and God's people – spiritually speaking.

There is an interior door of our house that had a squeak. One day I decided to fix it by spraying some WD40 on it. Sure enough, the squeak stopped; but now the door slowly closes on its own. We have to have a small block to keep it open. This, by the way, would really bug Mark. He would have to fix it. All the other doors in the house are plumb except for this one. I guess I should have let the squeak do its thing because it was keeping the door open.

Spiritually speaking, we are called individually to be upright with God. We are called to keep our family plumb. We are called to keep our community upright as well as our nation. It's not so easy. If everyone is askew, the upright person will stand out. Yet, we're not called to blend in (although we may really want to), we're called to be upright, to be plumb and true.

Ever been at a lunch with some people who were being negative about everything? One choice is to go with the flow; the other is to remain upright. Remember the story about Mark and the top floor condo. He called the owners because years ago, when he was just starting out, he plumbed a door (which is what he was paid to do) and left it at that. His general contractor called and yelled at him because the windowsills were slanted – why, because they were not plumb. He learned that day that he should have called the GC or the owners and told them. He himself was not being plumb by not saying anything.

Dr. Dwyer is quoted with saying, "If you have the choice to be right, or kind, choose to be kind." Another author recently wrote this: if you choose to be kind over being right, you will be right every time. Kindness is our plumb line; not being "right". Mark was right by hanging the door correctly and leaving the job site. But, the kind thing would be to call someone. He learned it and made the adjustments in himself. Those adjustments made it into today's sermon – something he never would have imagined.

We are living in a particularly unkind time in American history. We have moved away from compassion, mercy, understanding, forgiveness and unity. (If we ever were actually those things) Yet, God's plumb line is standing in our personal lives, in our families, in our communities and in our nation. Amos is still speaking God's word about measuring ourselves not against the whims of society but against God's will.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.