

Gravity

I've done this trick before: "This is a plumb line." The last time I did this, it was because of an emotional reaction I had to the Syrian Refugee crisis. There were pictures in the news of a dead toddler washed up on the shore of the Mediterranean and stories about people desperately trying to get out of a living hell. Frankly, my plumb line angered a few people, which while unpleasant personally, tells me that it's doing what it's supposed to do, because it's a prophetic vision, it's meaning is clear. It is supposed to tell those in power that things are not as they should be. Not surprisingly, those to whom the message is directed, often do not want to hear it.

It's a tricky thing this plumb line, because if you think that it's message is just because of my political leanings, or because of some other set of principles that reasonable people might disagree upon you might be tempted to just ignore it, or be angry at me for bringing it up. The thing is though, a plumb line is a very simple tool, like a bubble level or a tape measure, which helps you confirm that you are building things correctly. You cannot always trust your eyes and your instincts, you need things that are constant and a way to check your progress against those things. That's why prophets are necessary, and also why they generally anger people. The thing is though, their insights about God's intention, God's anger, and God's love are all very important for us to pay attention to, and we argue with their conclusions at our peril, like a mason who ignores what the plumb line is saying we ignore the correction of prophets at our peril. The plumb line is a simple and effective tool because it relies on something that is constant and reliable: gravity. If you ignore the plumb line, you ignore gravity, and if you ignore gravity things are going to come crashing down. It's not there just to bother you, or to try to make you feel bad about things, it's there to tell you how to build something durable.

So what gravity pulls on our plumb line so that it tells us how to build true things? It won't do to just say God, because we have too many different ideas about what god might be. We need to be more specific about what we mean when we say God. Since we, as Christians, have Jesus to give us some more specifics than say Amos and Jeroboam had available to them, we can probably safely say that God is love. And on top of that, we can say, again thanks to Jesus, that we know something about what kind of love that is. Love is the foundation and the plan for everything that is of God. If we build according to love, our society and our lives together will be loving and true.

Here's the thing though, once you start building a wall, you have to keep checking. You can't "trust your eye." Good carpenters measure a lot and check their levels constantly. Good masons pay attention to the plumb line every step of the way. If you don't keep matching the plumb line, little mistakes get amplified and eventually make the whole structure unstable. The thing you need to know about Jeroboam, Amaziah and even Herod (who I know, makes a really good bad guy) is that they think they're doing things the way they need to be done. They're doing the same thing as many of us, just trying to get through, trying to make the best of a bad situation. They might even see and acknowledge that the wall is crooked, but they feel like they're just a brick in the wall and they can't really change it now.

This week, on Thursday morning, I read the daily devotion that I read from Richard Rohr as is my daily practice. He talked about the meaning of the word radical, and how its Latin root is very different from the way we generally use it. The Latin word is *radix* which means "root." In contrast to what we generally think of as radical; something far flung and extreme, something radical is actually something deep at the core. To say something is "radically changed," means that it has changed deeply, not just superficially. So here's the thing that I was already thinking about: what if we have disregarded the

plumb line for too long, what is the only way to fix the structure? A “radical change,” meaning something that goes down deep enough to find where we started to go crooked, not just trying to adjust the latest several tiers of the thing, but actually going deep to where the problem started.

That might be hard, and it might be painful. There is a saying that you might hear in different versions, which says something along the lines of: “Don’t cling to a mistake, just because you spent a long time making it.” That is the motivation of most of the people who want to tell the prophets to go away. Jeroboam and Amaziah felt too deeply invested in a system that had become warped and perverted. They didn’t say Amos was wrong, Amaziah said, “the land is not able to bear all his words.” His words were, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel must go into exile.” In other words, the bricks that have to come down are the King and even the people themselves. They were built too crooked to stand. Amaziah and Jeroboam are not happy about this, because in their mind they haven’t been doing wicked things, they have just been doing what was necessary and expedient, in their mind they were doing what was best for the people.

Powerful people are like that a lot, they don’t pay attention to the plumb line, because they feel like the thing is going up straight and true just fine, after all, they are kings, or senators, or presidents or captains of industry. Their success tells them that they have no reason to worry about gravity or the inevitable consequence of building crooked things. Herod, in the Gospel reading, hears the words of John the Baptist (also a prophet) and he likes what he hears, but he is also fearful of what he hears. He likes it because it is true, he fears it because it threatens what he wants, and as a king, he is used to getting what he wants. Herod eventually becomes a victim of all the choices that he made up to a certain point, and is forced to behead a man that he seems to know is a messenger from God. He was never willing to actually consult the plumb line and go back far enough to the root of things to fix what he had built.

It occurs to me that we do in fact need to make a radical change, a deep change, we cannot keep trying to only adjust the top stones, pushing and pulling them back and forth, that will never make the wall stable, we must get to the root causes of what is wrong. We have serious moral crises to face: poverty, racism, violence, addiction, inequality, oppression. All of these things have deep roots in our social structure. All of them are evidence of the fact that we have not been paying attention to the plumb line, we are not building true to the nature of God’s love, and our wall is very crooked. I am afraid that most of us are not willing to do the work of tearing back enough layers to get down to the *radix* of the problem.

We are at a moment in this country where we have to make a decision, we can keep trying our best to prop up an unstable wall that has been founded upon greed, envy, apathy, overconsumption, unhealthy appetites, vengeful anger, and pride, you know, what they used to call the seven deadly sins, or we can look to the foundation that was given to us not just by our founding fathers, but by our Heavenly Father. Love enacted by a society looks like justice, or as Cornel West put it, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” A wall built true to that model would not just provide justice for a few, but would offer justice for all. We cannot continue to try and just move around the stones that are about to come crashing down, we have to reckon with the gravity of love, and we have to build true to what the plumb line of Christ shows us. This is a plumb line.