

HUM ... DID I HEAR THAT RIGHT?
"Mind Your Own Business"
Amos 7.7-17

July 10, 2022 Year C: Sunday of Pentecost for July 10th

Butte Aldersgate United Methodist Church

A man came home drunk after a night of carousing in a number of neighborhood bars. His wife helped him up to the bedroom, helped him undress and tucked him into bed.

Then she kneeled at his bedside and whispered, "John do you want me to pray for you?" He nodded a yes and she began to pray, "Dear Lord, I pray for my husband who lies here before you drunk ... "

Before she could finish, he interrupts. "Don't tell him I'm drunk," he pleads, "just tell him I'm sick."¹

I think we can all identify with this visual aid – a measuring tape. This fantastic tool is probably used more than any device except for pliers and screw drivers. This tape cannot guarantee that you won't make a mistake, but it will help you find the exact measurement of just about anything. And here is something else about the measuring tape. It never changes. You pick up another tape even written in a different language, and it will still be the same. Whether it is in inches and feet or meters, it is still the same measurement.

This summer we are spending some time looking at passages that are misunderstood, misinterpreted, that can lead us off in tangents, or lead us in places that God does not want us to go; something I'm calling UM ... DID I HEAR THAT RIGHT? And today we have a passage that can really be misinterpreted. Let's listen.

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will spare them no longer; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

"Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'

¹ Dan Safarik. "Just tell God I'm sick not drunk." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part V*. 6.

Therefore thus says the Lord: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.” (Amos 7.7-17)

Um ... did I hear that right? His wife is going to be a prostitute. Um ... did I hear that right? Israel is going to be destroyed. Um ... did I hear that right? Amos is telling me what to do with my life; a guy who herds goats and trims trees. Um ... did I hear that right? Mind your own business, Amos. And I think that would be a good place to end my sermon., but I have a story to tell you.

There is a story about a pastor who was leaving on vacation, and he wrote: “I took our car to the local car wash to get it cleaned up for the trip. Before I went to the cashier, I noticed some CD’s by the *Beach Boys*. I picked out two and went to the cash register. The transaction took place, and I walked outside to wait for my clean car.

“As I started to think about the amount of money I paid, I realized I wasn’t charged enough for the two tapes. The cashier rang up 99 cents apiece instead of \$4.99 apiece. I went back to the cashier and told her that she hadn’t charged me enough money.

“I said, ‘I owe you another \$8 plus tax.’ She looked at me and said I know you still owe me money. I was in your church last Sunday. I didn’t charge you enough just to see if you were an honest man.”²

Um ... did I hear that right? One reaction is to say, “Mind your own business” or to realize that story hit a little too close to home. Do we measure up? Do I measure up as a pastor? Whether one is in the professional ministry or just a professing Christian, people are watching us. These buttons – that say *Aldersgate in Action* – mean we are identified with this church and when we wear this button we live up to the standard. We can’t mind our own business. The tape measure is before us as something to live up to.

I want to share with you the story of Erik Arnold. I did not have the happiest of childhoods. My grade school years were filled with memories of being picked on in school. When I was about 8 or 9 a new boy moved to town named Erik Arnold. There is a lot that I remember about Erik. He was funny. He wore wild clothes. He loved the musician Prince and the movie *Goonies*. I also remember he had an acne problem and used to bathe with a certain soap that helped his skin. Oh, and nothing seemed to phase Erik. Not even his acne. I admired Erik. In fact, one could say I wanted to measure up to Erik Arnold.

Erik was not a bully, yet he got along with the bullies. Erik was not an athlete, yet he got along with the athletes. Erik wasn’t really that smart, yet he got along with the smart kids. About the only people that Erik had a hard time relating to was the teachers who didn’t always appreciate his boisterous personality.

I liked Erik Arnold. I admired him. And I was impressed with his ability to relate to all kinds of people. So, when I was in the 8th grade, I decided I needed to be more like Erik. My goal was to measure up to Erik Arnold. Not by getting more acne or listening to Prince (although I did enjoy the movie, *Goonies*). I decided I needed to be as funny and as goofy as Erik. When bullies would pick on me, I would laugh and tease them back, like Erik did. And it worked. I found that their attitude changed. But I do remember that

² Seth L. Leypoldt. “Living By a Symbol or Are You Measuring Up?” (Bradshaw United Methodist Church sermon. July 11, 2004.)

my goofball antics were not always appreciated by the teachers. But in my attempts to measure up to Erik Arnold I noticed something about myself. I felt better, I felt a lot better than I had in a long time. With a sense of humor and some joking, the other kids quit picking on me. I soon learned that I could use humor deflect either serious, or difficult, or uncompromising situations. For good or ill I was attempting to measure up to Erik Arnold and in the process learned something about myself.

Now imagine you are a prophet in Israel. Your job is to tell the people of Israel, you are not measure up. Maybe you've got a tape measure; or maybe it's a plumb line; and what kind of response do you get, "Mind Your Own Business." In today's passage, Amos he is telling the people of Israel, God is watching you. He is saying to Israel: we are a beacon of hope to the entire world. We have the ability to do God's work and to be faithful to God. That is our job. In Amos' prophecy he tells Israel - Are You Measuring Up?

Um ... did I hear that right? Let's look at this text again. There is a big misinterpretation. The popular translation of verse 7 is "a plumb line." This is a tool used to measure, to keep things straight, to keep everything in line, much like the tool a survey crew would use. This translation is popular, but unfortunately it may be incorrect. The word translated as plumb line is *anak* and is an Akkadian word - an ancient language of the region - and literally translates as something like tin but it can also mean an audible "sigh," used in disappointment. How many of us when we are disappointed with our children, our co-workers, our neighbors, often sigh when they don't live up to our expectations? The meaning appears to be ambiguous - maybe that is the point - it can either mean tin or a "sigh" or it could mean both.

With this new understanding of the word *anak* one translator has suggested that verse 7 should read: "This is what God showed me: a wall of silver is seen. God is standing with silver in his hand."

And the Lord said to me, "Amos what do you see?"

And I said, "A wall of silver."

The Lord said, "I am putting shivering in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again will pass them by.

The message is that grave. God is saying to Israel - look at yourself in that wall. How do you see yourself? Does it measure up to what God has in plan and in store for you? Or will God be disappointed?

Have you ever polished silver? When we unpacked, we put away into that built in china hutch in the parsonage all of our silver; and we made a big decision; we would not polish it. Polishing silver is hard, tough, and quite tedious work; and you have to keep working until you see that shine; until your own reflection is seen in the silver. Once you see yourself, you recognize the hard work that you put into it. And that is the crux of this passage, for God is hoping that you see your own reflection in the work we do for God. Your potential lies in the ability to do God's handiwork, so God can be proud and not sigh in disappointment.

Outside the gates of heaven, near the entrance to the Supreme-Supreme Court of Angels and Saints, there is a dressing room. It gives candidates, before the most important interview of their lives, a place to first check their appearance.

One day a good and devout woman arrived at heaven's gate. An angel directed her to the dressing room where she found four full-length mirrors. She checked her hair

and makeup, and all was in order. Out of her small casket-suitcase she took her choir robe (she sang every Sunday at church). She slipped on the robe and pinned on it her good-conduct medals for piety, donations to clothing drives, and Christmas charity to the poor. (During the other eleven months, however, she seldom thought of or even cared what happened to the poor, considering those on welfare to be lazy and shiftless.)

Next, she put her rosary -- which she had prayed daily -- in her pocket and applied to her face the rouge which glowed from the three thousand vigil candles she had lighted in her lifetime. She lifted her robe and inspected the calluses on her knees from her long hours of prayer and adoration. All was perfect. Finally, she stepped out of the door and stood before heaven's Supreme-Supreme Court.

The angles and saints hooted, booed, and threw rotten eggs and tomatoes at her as they shouted, "Shame! Shame!" In tears she ran out of the courtroom. As she fled weeping, she ran past another woman at the door. The second woman was entering reluctantly since she was a sinner. She never went to church -- well, almost never. She never prayed unless a crisis was at hand. She was guilty of a host of petty sins and a few large ones as well. As she entered the dressing room and opened her casket-suitcase, she discovered that it was empty!

She stood naked before the all-revealing mirrors, her face red with shame. When the angel called, "Next," she pleaded not to be sent before the court: "Please have mercy, I am a sinner. I am ashamed to appear before the saints. I am not worthy to be here."

The angel pushed her through the door anyway, and she found herself standing naked before the Supreme-Supreme Court. As one body, they all stood and applauded loud and long. A neon sign over the entrance to heaven lit up with the message, GO THIS WAY. As she approached the entrance, she saw that it was only four feet high! Above it was a sign that read Servants Entrance. Appropriate Dress Required.³

Um ... did I hear that right? All I have to do to get into heaven is wait for the end? All I have to do to get into heaven is just be a servant? Um ... did I hear that right? What about years of service? What about all the work I put into the church? And for my neighbors; and making sure my children went to Sunday school; and all the donations to pledge drives and building funds; what about all the casseroles I made. Um ... did I hear that right? All I have to do is humble myself. Well, maybe I should just mind my own business until I feel God is ready for me. Um ... did I hear that right?

One of my favorite images of John Wesley is the concept of the *imago dei*. It's a Greek word that just means "image of God." Wesley said that every time you look in the mirror you should see the image of God shining back. Does God want us to mind our own business? Does God want us to ignore our neighbor in need? Does God want us to pass by those who need our help? Does God want us to wait until the very end and say, OK God I'm here to help? Or does God want us to get involved.

Paul writes, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we see face to face. (1 Cor. 13.12)" It is that mirror; it is that shiny surface that we should be looking at. For God says that the person we should be measuring up to is ourselves. There is another scripture that comes from Genesis, where God says we are all created in God's image. What an incredible metaphor for life. Before us is the endless possibility of what God is expecting. This is the message of Amos to his people in Israel. You are being watched;

³ *Ibid.*

you need to be a shining example of a God-like influence in your life. Remember to not let God pass you by. Remember you are polishing silver. Do not become some audible “sigh” of disappointment. Allow your reflection to shine like it’s supposed to be. Minding our own business is not an option.

I want to conclude with a poem about living up to such potential. Although this poem is written for women, we can all learn from its meaning. It is called *The Woman in the Glass*.

When you get what you want in your struggle for self
And the world makes you queen for a day,
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself,
And see what THAT woman has to say.

For it isn’t your husband or family or friend
Who judgement upon you must pass;
The woman whose verdict counts most in the end
Is the one staring back in the glass.

Some people may think you’re a straight-shootin’ chum
And call you a person of place
But the woman in the glass says you’re only a bum
If you can’t look her straight in the face.

She’s the woman to please, never mind all the rest
For she’s with you clear up to the end,
And you’ve passed your most dangerous, difficult test
If the woman in the glass is your friend.

You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years
And get pats on the back as you pass,
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you’ve cheated the woman in the glass.⁴

Paul writes, um ... did I hear that right? Minding your own business is not an option. We must all get involved so that we can live up, measure up, and shine up as the God given potential found in the mirror. Amen.

⁴ *Ibid.*