

July 15, 2012

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Mark 6:14-29, Amos 7:7-15

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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So, the first time that I had ever heard of a plumb line was back when I was in college preparing to go on an alternative spring break trip to Honduras. It was going to be a building mission. In preparing for this trip, we talked with friends who had gone the year before. They told us about how primitive the conditions were, how they had carried rocks or as they described them, boulders for miles to pile up and use to build a community center. We heard about how sore their muscles were, how much they sweat, but also what a good experience the whole thing had been for them. And so with much anticipation and excitement, we packed our bags and flew-off on our own building mission. The first day or so as we acclimated to the country, we were given an orientation to the village we would be working in and the type of labor we would be doing. A big part of the orientation was about listening to the Honduran site supervisor and following his lead. This was the man who carried in his pocket a string with a rock tied to the end of it – the all important plumb line. The rock weighs the string down and pulls it straight. It is used in construction to determine verticality, to make sure that walls aren't being built at an angle but perfectly plumb, perfectly straight to ensure stability. This as you can imagine is of utmost importance in construction. So, the second thing we learned during our orientation, was that the community center that the mission team the year before had worked so hard to help build had fallen down because one of the walls was not plumb. That community center had been in the town of Zasalapa, and so of course our team decided to be slightly obnoxious and take on the motto of Zasalapa nunca mas! Zasalapa never again! And we called the site supervisor over to bring out his plumb line with practically every brick that we placed. Our building would be plumb, would be solid, and strong. There was no way that our walls were going to be tumbling down.

So, not only is the plumb line a useful tool in determining verticality or depth, but my friend Wikipedia also tells me that the rock on the end of that string directs itself exactly toward the earth's center of gravity. It serves as an indicator pointing in the truest direction to be firmly grounded. In the reading from Amos, God uses this imagery of a plumb line as a spiritual guide for the people of Israel "See I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by."

This imagery that God uses of a plumb line is helpful in terms of thinking about our own spiritual growth and discipline. We all know that spiritual depth and assurance of faith are not things that just kind of happen. They take work and require our attention. If you have been around Geoffrey in the past couple of months, you have heard him posing the question: "What are our expectations of ourselves for membership in this community?" What do we each expect of ourselves in terms of worship? Are we Christmas/Easter folks? Do we come most Sundays to church or are our lives such that we can only come a couple times each month. Do we attend church when we are out of

town? The answer is different for each of us. There is no one size fits all to the equation here. But it is worth being conscious of – both what your current worship and religious study habits are and also what your expectations are for yourself regarding your spiritual development.

Last Sunday, my daughters and I were driving back to Atlanta from vacation in North Carolina and Madelynne asked me, “Mom, what’s the day of today?” It’s Sunday, honey. “Are we going to church, Mommy?” “No, honey we are driving home today.” “Noooo, It’s Sunday! We go to church on Sunday.” Now this probably points more towards the rigidity of a 4 year old and less towards incredible spiritual depth, but as a mom and a priest, I won’t lie. My heart filled with joy that for my daughter, this community, and being present in worship are both already a priority for her and integral to the rhythms of her life and the ordering of her world.

This is not a guilt trip sermon. Hang with me. Regular worship is important. Regular religious study is important. The time that we put in to focusing on our faith, to focusing on our relationship with God, and then moving beyond ourselves to put that faith into action out in the world – this is what grounds us. That is how we make sure that our spiritual foundations are strong and our walls are plumb.

As we worship God, we hopefully are challenged to expand our view of the world beyond our own immediate day-to-day reality – beyond our individual worries, anxieties and fears. For a space we are reminded that we are not the center of the universe, but that there is someone greater than ourselves, the God of love, for whom our heart and soul is continually seeking and yearning. And we re-align, re-member, re-order our selves and once again bring our whole being into conversation and communion with God.

And then as we say the Nicene Creed together, and hear all of our voices raised in unison, and as we offer our communal confession of sins, and are then forgiven together by the God of love, and finally gather together around God’s table – each of these pieces of our worship remind us again that this is not a solitary journey of faith that we are on. God calls us into a community - a beautiful flawed community of people who are on this same journey with us, who will also stumble at times and fall short of the beloved person that God created them to be. And it is upon this community that we each rely to ensure that our line is plumb, that our faith foundation is strong and our walls are straight. It happens organically in the conversations we have with one another whether it be around the dinner table during foyer group, or while folding socks at Threads, or in a Kerygma class, or even in the hushed conversations out in the narthex while serving as an usher. (OK, I’m stretching it a little bit) But really, it is in these interactions when we are present to one another and can point to God at work in one another’s lives; these conversations, these relational connections, these points where we are stretched are the mortar that make our foundations strong and sure. We are not always going to agree with one another, and with this community especially we can trust one another to call us out when we are veering off-course, down a path that might weaken the structure of our faith. So your decision to be present and engaged in this community and in our worship is important both for yourselves individually and for the health of the whole community of All Saints’.

Today we have this rather bizarre gospel story about the beheading of John the Baptist. John, you of course remember, is not only a relative of Jesus, an important prophet, but also the one who baptized Jesus in the river. This story of Herod thinking about Jesus as a reincarnation of John, serves to remind us of the threat that looms over Jesus especially as his actions, his teachings, his influence expands beyond himself to include the ministry of disciples. There is no doubt that John's violent death is a display of the earthly strength and power. It is a warning not to question or undermine the earthly kingdom. And while we are not told this directly, I would imagine that the beheading of John gave Jesus at least some pause, some fear that the same would happen to him if he continued down the path that God had set before him. But his faith is sure, his foundation is strong. Jesus is the ultimate plumb line for all of God's beloved creation and he continues the work that God has given him, along with the community of the disciples, offering God's love and healing to all who will receive it.

Hopefully none of us will experience that same level of fear and threat that Jesus must have experienced. And hopefully we will not have to mourn the tragic and violent death of a beloved. But we each probably already have and will again experience situations in our lives that are challenging, maybe even overwhelming, and incredibly sad. It is part and parcel of being in community and in relationship with one another. It's the vulnerability that comes when we open ourselves to love one another. So whether we are facing the death of a loved one, or are feeling utterly helpless as we watch as someone we love as they are ravaged by an illness, or we struggle to know how to help someone who feels their spirit being crushed by financial anxieties, whatever the situation is none of us are sheltered from the heartbreak and strife that life can bring.

And this is when our faith in God can either feel challenged or be a source of strength and comfort. I have seen people react in very different ways – furious, flailing around angry at God for allowing such a thing to happen to them; or on the other end of the spectrum strong, determined, putting one foot in front of the other, trusting that they will make it through the present challenge. We each react to challenge in our own ways, but if we tend to our spiritual development we don't have to feel as if we are lost not sure which direction to turn, flailing about in the wind – we don't have to be that string without a rock, without a weight anchoring it down. Even in the midst of extreme pain and anxiety and turmoil, we can remain grounded and steady, we can know which way to turn our face and our feet – toward the God of love. Even in the midst of extreme turmoil, we know at our core who it is that God created us to be, and through our spiritual practice we can see God's presence in our lives and out in the world around us. And so even in the chaos, even when it feels like the walls are crumbling down around us we are still able to point to that ultimate reality beyond and above ourselves, but it takes practice, and it requires presence – your presence.

One month from today we will have four new interns arriving in Atlanta to start the All Saints' Atlanta Project. They are four recent college graduates who have committed themselves to living simply, working in the Atlanta community in various non-profit agencies, while also living in intentional Christian community and devoting time to spiritual discernment. One of the first things we will ask them to do is to develop and take on a Rule of Life, modeled loosely after the Benedictine Rule. Their rule of life will

include regular worship, study, and reflection as a community; sharing meals together, worshipping here on Sunday mornings with the larger All Saints' community and finally intense engagement with some aspect of the All Saints' parish. And just so that they don't take themselves too seriously, we will remind them to include fun in their community rule of life. I share this with you as an example of what I am talking about in terms of intentionality with your own spiritual development- there is time for study, worship, and fellowship - within each of these is the explicit expectation of mindful presence.

In our traditional period of silence, I invite you to think about the image of the plumb line. Think about your own spiritual foundation -- where it is strong and where you might need to shore it up, maybe consider creating your own rule of life. And then think about this community that God has called you to, and consider how God is inviting you to be present here in the beloved community of God.