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Christ Church, Exeter
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The Parable of the Good Samaritan/Hamas Member. What?!

The Lord God shows the prophet Amos a way to measure what is right and true. The Lord said, "Amos, what do you see?" And Amos said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel." Amos 7

A plumb line then and now is a painter's and carpenter's tool – a cord with a weight attached to one end that uses gravity to find right angles and to determine horizontal and vertical lines. It shows the most direct line from the top to the bottom and keeps things, so to speak, plumb. Buildings will crumble if the walls are not built level. The plumb line is steady and predictable and set the standard.

Amos and his plumb line made him an unwelcome visitor to the north where he cried out warnings that things were not what they appeared. By any metric, there was great wealth and power, but something was looming on the horizon. Amos warned, a mighty nation would come and wipe it all away. And that was their fate.

A plumb line is a good image with which to jump into the very well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. Among the many questions it raises: how do we as individuals and as a larger society measure up to what God desires? Do we forget or ignore from time to time what is right because we are worried, consumed with consuming, or simply afraid to do anything different? What are we to do with those who are in the ditches of life -- left alone to struggle and even perish.

This week I turned again to a gem of a book given to me by a member of the parish called "Short Stories by Jesus" by the Jewish schooler Amy-Jill Levine. Hers is an outsider's take on this familiar Christian parable.

She begins by questioning the term "good Samaritan" itself and suggests that we should hear it more as an offensive term as it would have been heard to a Jew in Jesus' day than a complement. The same way as today it would more offensive than not to say that someone is good Mexican, a good Arab, a good Muslim – as opposed to all the other Mexicans, Arabs and Muslims in the world. She suggests that over the centuries the story has been domesticated in our desire to see the idealized Christian as being, well, a good Samaritan – someone willing to do anything for a stranger.

Levine reminds her readers that Biblical Samaria is today's West Bank, the Occupied Territory in Palestine or Greater Israel. So, an updated version of the story would sound like this: "An Israeli Jew is on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho today and is attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed and left half-dead in a ditch. (pg. 115).

Two people who should have stopped to help him passed by: a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Force, and second, a member of the local mission network of the Presbyterian Church. But the person who took compassion and shows the Israeli Jew mercy is a Palestinian Muslim who is a member of Hamas -- Hamas being the organization that anticipates Israel's destruction. Levine gives a new name to the familiar story: the parable of the Good Hamas Member. Does she have our attention now?

There have traditionally been many excuses given for why the priest and the Levite passed by the wounded traveler. Both priests and Levites did not do anything exceptional or holy to become who they were: it was a title and a role given to them by their birth. Many have commented that for them to approach a dying or dead person would have made them ritually unclean – which had to be the reason they could not stop. But they were heading down from Jerusalem, not up -- meaning that they were walking away from any religious duties they may have had. The point being is that excuses of why not to do something that is so basic to the fabric of faith – loving God and showing love towards one's neighbor was not a new or radical concept – just does not measure up. It does not pass, shall we say, the plumb line test.

What we know of Biblical history is that if during Jesus' time Jews and Samaritans kept their distance, at one point centuries before they were the same people. One branch of the family went one way and the other went another way. Families do that. Nations and religions do that. Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace back to Abraham, but the branches of the families split over time and hostilities, persecutions and prejudice often settled for too long. Over time family members and kin can, without even knowing why or how, become enemies.

Levine in her book describes the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was an 18-mile path that descended 2,500 feet above sea level to Jericho's 825 feet below. The Romans finally paved the road in the decades after Jesus' death, but that was only to facilitate their destruction of Jerusalem. Everyone who heard the original story knew that road was dangerous. But it was a road that some could not avoid.

The parable's punch lays in the surprise that the one who had compassion, the Samaritan did what was required and expected of someone who took love of God and neighbor to heart.

Who then is our neighbor? The one who breaks down barriers. The one who was not afraid to get their hands dirty. Who puts themselves out there. The one who shows mercy.

If God set God's plumb line in the midst of our lives and our society right now, how might we measure up to this challenging story?

What I see is that too many get bogged down with labeling the one at the side of the road left for half dead – when he goes unnamed in the parable.

A few weekends ago Leslie and I spent the weekend in Philadelphia and walking back from a restaurant to our hotel near the convention center we saw countless homeless people sleeping through the heat and, right in front of us, shooting needles into their arms. I hadn't been that close so such open drug use since the 80's in the South Bronx where I did my field work in seminary. Did I stop right there and try to stop them or check them into rehab – no, but that isn't my full point. I think I was more stunned than anything. And yet I looked at those in front of me with great sadness, rather than blame. I wondered where and how they began their journeys. What went wrong? Who may have wronged them? What made them turn to this life and how many times did they try to change? Could they turn their lives around through a program or outreach?

I read today's parable to three groups of immigrant detainees at the jail in Dover yesterday when we shared Holy Eucharist. I asked them a question many of them could answer easily. I asked: what was the road that brought you here? What was it like leaving El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala heading north? To the young man from Angola, I wondered how far he had come to flee. To the three Roma women from different parts of Europe – often called Gypsies in a different era – who would ever help them be reunited with their families?

For those of us whose road to get where we are today was not marked by murder, abuse, gangs, wars and poverty, the temptation might be to spiritualize this parable and see the Good Samaritan as the perfect Christian or ultimate do-gooder. And maybe we should take a look again at those dangerous roads and consider ways to make them safer for our neighbors.

This past week we shared some resources in the weekly email that goes out to try to shed some light on what our church is doing at the border. As summer heats up and as we are able to enjoy days at the beach and mountains – the gifts of the beautiful place we live – I hope we keep our eyes and ears open to what is happening.

I believe that the conditions at our southern border where asylum seekers are being housed in what has been widely reported as deplorable conditions are a test to our common humanity. The jail in Dover is Shangri-La in comparison. It is easy to be overwhelmed into not knowing what to do. It is hard these days to even trust what is true. – I get that. It is rational to want better laws, and we almost got some a few years ago in Congress. What is harder for me in listening again to today's parable is to cast all blame on the travelers who departed on what they knew would be a hard road. It is shaky moral ground, in my view, to blame parents without knowing the literal hell they are leaving behind. Let us resist the bait of blaming the ones at the side of the road for needing help.

We may not be able to attend vigils or maybe writing letters to legislators is not our thing. But when and if the conversation comes up at work, the barbershop, or over dinner with friends, I hope that what stays with us is what Jesus pushed that lawyer to see. That the enemies and the scapegoats and strawmen we were raised to

believe will come after us, may in a moment of mutual need and caring, show us that the cycle of fear and death can be broken. (idea of breaking cycle taken from Levine, page 112).

It's never too late to take out God's plumb line to see if the kind of world we are building is on solid moral ground. Would we measure up in acts of mercy and compassion?