

The Parts Within
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Amos 7:1-7 ~ July 11, 2021

We know well the experience of saying, a part of me wants to do x, but another part really wants to do that other thing. A part of me wants to go out to the party tonight; another part really wants to stay home. In recent years, I've become an amateur practitioner of something called Internal Family Systems. Developed over the past forty years by psychologist Dick Schwartz, Internal Family Systems – IFS – has gained significant respect in the therapeutic world. One may see in it elements of Jungian psychology, family systems therapy, and Zen Buddhism.

The underlying premise is that each of us is indeed comprised or populated with many parts. It's as if there really is a Ledlie within who wants to go to the party, and another Ledlie within who wants to stay home, and a host of other little Ledlie's as well, each of whom has their own perspectives and inclinations. At times, we may be overtaken by a part – with feelings of insecurity, or anxiety, or fury. “I was beside myself!” we might say.

As we cultivate a practice of attentiveness – awareness - we may increase our capacity to live in and from a state of true self. Visualize your conscious mind as your living room, with a basement beneath. Some part of you may be occupying the living room. Right now, part of you may be leaning in, thinking “this is fascinating, this IFS.” Another part has arms crossed feeling pretty skeptical. Yet another is wondering if or when I'm going to mention Jesus. All those parts of you, chiming in.

As we come to recognize and know the different parts of ourselves, we will become increasingly conscious of our true “self” who is the one seeing, recognizing. As we get to know our parts, it is vital to approach each one with a spirit of curiosity and compassion – especially those parts that make us feel

uncomfortable or ashamed. Most of our parts were formed when we were very young, and many of them are still very young – little boys and girls. Early on, some of our parts learned that it was unsafe for them to show their faces. Other parts were deemed bad and banished. Some have not seen the light of day for many years; they are in need of recognition and healing, to be brought into the fold for the well-being, integrity, and wholeness of our souls.

It is through this lens I invite us to hear the words of the prophet Amos. His witness is powerful – memorable – in part because it is simple. Amos simply holds up a plumb line: a string with a weight on the bottom, a measuring tool used by masons and builders since the beginning of time to ensure that the wall, column or foundation is not leaning one way or ‘tother; to ensure that it is plumb. With this simple tool, there is no room for negotiation, no need for judgment or explanation. The wall or building next to which the line is held is either plumb or not plumb.

So, Amos does not need to be a sophisticated philosopher, theologian or tactician. Indeed, he is a herdsman; a dresser of sycamore trees. Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes Amos and his ilk as “uncredentialed authoritative speakers;” he is a truth teller.

Much as we value truth, it can have the disconcerting effect of revealing our hypocrisies, little lies, and accommodations. The truth holds us accountable.

Next to what construct did Amos’ hold his plumb line? That too we can treat simply. All we really need to know is that in those days – the 8th century before the Christian Era – the ruler at the time was a man named Jeroboam. As with all rulers, Jeroboam exercised leadership in a manner that served his interests and suited him quite well – not outrageously corrupt, but, you know, a little extra here and there. And with orders of state, Jeroboam had a high priest – Amaziah, who served to legitimize Jeroboam’s authority and reign, with rituals and dignity. It was a comfortable arrangement – for a certain discreet segment of the population.

Until this little uncredentialed authoritative tree-hugging prophet showed up with his plumb line! Then, all could see who was benefitting from the current arrangement – and who was not. And lest there be any misunderstanding about the claim Amos’ presence made upon the people of God, in addition to his plumb line, Amos is best remembered for proclaiming: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” ‘Twas a plumbline adhering not only to the laws of gravity, but, more importantly to the laws of God’s truth, of justice, of righteousness – which here means right living, with integrity.

The beauty is that, with this metaphor, Amos has provided us with a tool that even a child can use with great effect. Anyone can hold up a plumbline. Shane Claiborne, a colleague in Philadelphia and leader in the new monasticism movement, is fond of asking, “what if Jesus really meant the things he said? You know, about giving away all that we have to the poor, forgiving our enemy; things like that.” Or another colleague, Jane Cosby, an elderly African American leader in the Philadelphia diocese, often looked around at the beginning of a meeting, and wondered aloud, “well, let’s see, who is not at the table today?” Or years ago, when my son was a wee five-year old, walking along the city street with his hand tucked in mine, we passed a man on the sidewalk, holding up a plaintive cup. And for whatever reason, I chose that day to stride by purposefully: Nick looked from the man up to me – silently inquiring, really? You’re going to walk right by?

We can hold the plumbline up next to all manner of political or ecclesiastical constructs. We can also pay attention, internally – recognize that we each have our internal Jeroboam – the part that has established order, equilibrium, a little hierarchy to make choices, ensure efficiency, some comfort. And our internal Amaziah – the priestly part that tends to the personal stories that justify and maintain our routines, our little rituals, our way of doing things. And then, the

internal Amos – the little girl or boy – whose presence recalls to us the truth, perhaps the truth we’ve known all along.

I think it fair to say that, try as we might, the Jeroboam’s and the Amaziah’s hold sway most of the time. At least, that is so in the stories of scripture; prophetic truth tellers arrive on the scene in response to a crisis. That, or their presence prompts a crisis. Time and again, the internal Amos recalls to us the way of truth and integrity.

Another detail I’ve not yet mentioned: the prophets, they are sent from God. Internally, this is that part deep within you in touch with the holy, who bears the light not only of truth, but also the light of your beloved-ness as a child of God. As the psalmist recognizes in song to God, “you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you trace my journeys and are acquainted with all my ways.” There is a part within who knows the truth, the right, the good; who, from time to time may speak with clarity: Ledlie, this is the way, this is the path to take today.

More often than not, I can see the truth when it comes in the form of a question. And I recognize that the question is often some version of the questions posed in our baptismal covenant. (During our courtyard worship today,) (This morning) we are baptizing four beautiful, beloved children. In baptism, we bestow gifts of the Spirit, the promise of forgiveness, hope, and eternal life. We invite them into “a vowed life,” a life defined by relationship with God and one another. We do this, in part, by offering questions to live by; questions that serve as internal plumb line; that shape our lives.

Let us now renew our baptismal covenant. As we do, I invite you to receive these questions as if sent to you from God by way of some uncredentialed little truth teller holding up a plumb line. Not in judgment, not seeking explanation; simply wondering, how are you doing with this? We cannot attend to all of the

questions in one hearing, so I invite you to notice whichever one captures your attention today. Notice. Receive it as an invitation. Wonder what it means for you – today, this week, with the choices before you now. Trust and believe that the Holy Spirit of God is guiding you along the way.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? *I will, with God's help.*

Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation? *I will, with God's help.*