

# St Mary of the Harbor

## Provincetown, Massachusetts



Pentecost 5 C Proper 10

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

**Amos 7: 7-17** *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 never again pass them by; 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.'*

**Luke 10:25-37** *A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*



### **The Right Thing to Do**

Some of you may have read about a fellow named Scott Daniel Warren. He is a 36 year old teacher in Arizona who was tried last month in federal court as a felon. His crime? Providing water and food to refugees who had illegally crossed the U.S. Mexico border.

Warren is part of a small humanitarian group that has been targeted by border authorities for what is described as the criminalization of humanitarian action. Criminalization of humanitarian action? Whoever came up with that one had to have pulled it from way, way up there. Since when did helping to prevent people from dying in the desert qualify as criminal activity while it is perfectly legal to separate innocent children from their families and lock them up in cages?

As Warren and others like him have discovered, doing the right thing can get you into all kinds of trouble with the powers that be. To their credit, Warren and his compatriots have done what an alarming number of

churchgoers these days are unwilling to do. They have taken to heart the words of Jesus and prophets like Amos.

Like Jesus, Amos wasn't very popular with the higher ups in his day either. Evidently, the farmer turned prophet upset Israel's leaders when he spoke up for the poor and the dispossessed. This was at a time when the Northern kingdom was enjoying a long stretch of prosperity. Not unlike today, it was a time of plenty marked by an absence of compassion.

Now, it wasn't that Amos himself was a personal threat to anyone. He did not leave his farm behind and travel all the way from Judah to the northern kingdom to topple the king or takeover the sanctuary at Bethel. And unlike court subsidized prophets like Amaziah who made their living by appealing to the vanities of the powerful while conveniently ignoring their neglect of the poor and the disenfranchised, Amos wasn't in it for the money. He was simply there to deliver a message from God. Apparently it was a message that no one wanted to hear.

My guess is that Amos would be just about as welcome today as he was 2700 years ago; especially by those who are fond of claiming that the United States is a Christian nation. But you know, that rings hollow when you look at what is happening in this country. Even more so when you hold it up to the standard God uses to judge a nation's righteousness. Photographs of children locked in cages inside squalid American internment camps are indisputable indictments of our failure as Americans to live up to God's universal standard of love. Given the evidence, there can be but one conclusion: this nation is seriously out of plumb.

One can only question how any decent person, much less people of faith, can justify the harshness we are witnessing toward the most vulnerable of God's people when Jesus himself said plainly, "let the little children come to me." <sup>1</sup> At a time when refugees are being persecuted and punished, the poor treated with contempt and many of the wealthiest and powerful are concerned only with their own short term financial gain, you have to wonder if these people have ever heard of prophets like Amos, or even Jesus for that matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:14, Luke 18:15-17, Mark 10:13-16

Disturbing evidence from a recent Pew Foundation study found that people with no religious affiliation feel a greater moral responsibility to care for refugees than many Christians do. Only 25% of white evangelicals feel the nation has a moral obligation to welcome refugees.<sup>2</sup> That doesn't bode well for a self-appointed Christian nation. To me, they sound more like a group of churchgoers trying to justify themselves.

It's a bit like the lawyer who asked Jesus what he needed to do to be in God's good graces. Being well acquainted with the law, he could even quote chapter and verse. Love God and love your neighbor, he tells Jesus. Just one thing, he added: who is my neighbor?

Excellent question. Obviously, this fellow was someone who was serious about his faith and it showed. You could tell he really knew his stuff by the question he asked. A good lawyer knows the right answer to a question but a great lawyer knows the right question to ask.

Who is my neighbor? That's where it gets interesting. The answer to the question has never really been about the other person's religion, nationality, ethnicity, skin color or any other excuse on the long list of artificial parameters people have used over the years to differentiate themselves from their neighbors. When you listen to Jesus' parable, the answer has less to do with the other person than it does about us. Flip it around and the question isn't *who is my neighbor?* Rather, it is what kind of neighbor am I? The kind that ignores a fellow traveler in need or the kind that takes care of him when no one else will?

You know, doing the right thing probably won't make you popular or win you a place at the table of the privileged and the connected. And in some situations, it might even get you into trouble with the powers that be. But one thing you can count on: standing up for the weakest and most vulnerable among us meets the universal standard by which God judges nations and individuals. And you know what that means. When faced with the choice between helping a fellow traveler in need or ignoring them, love has been and always will be the right thing to do.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/evangelicals-immigration?rebellitem=1#rebellitem1>

