

**Sunday, July 15 and Wednesday, July 18 + 8<sup>th</sup> week after Pentecost**  
**Amos 7:7-15: “What’s Your Plumb Line?”**

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Sometimes the Old Testament prophets don’t make for the easiest reading. Even those who are most quoted from, including Jeremiah and Isaiah, hand out some pretty harsh judgments. Amos, a simple shepherd by trade, is no exception. For several chapters he goes through the major cities of Israel one by one, numbering their sins and pronouncing terrible destruction on them.

Like all the Hebrew prophets, though, Amos is not speaking for himself but conveying what God told him to say. His strong language and dramatic images are intended to shake people out of their stupor, to make them see what God wants for them, and to suggest what might happen to them if they continue in their wicked ways of idolatry and greed. We need to hear all of this because, after all the fire and brimstone, each of the Hebrew prophets eventually arrives at the central message, to the effect of: “Repent, return to the Lord, and live!”

That turn in Amos begins in earnest in our reading today, with the captivating image of the plumb line. The Lord tells Amos he is setting a plumb line in the midst of his people. A plumb line is a simple tool that tells whether or not something is perfectly vertical. It consists of a long string or wire with a weight of some sort suspended from it.

The image here is of a standard that will reveal how upright, how righteous the people are — or are not.

This invites each of us to ask: What is our plumb line? How do we measure our own righteousness? And not just of us as individuals, but the righteousness of our cities, of our state, of our nation?

For God's people, one of our most basic plumb lines is the Ten Commandments.

I'll use myself as an example. Worshiping idols, telling lies, committing adultery, of course I don't do those things. But I shouldn't feel too smug. What about the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor?" Well, I'd never do that, right? But then I remembered Luther's explanation of this commandment in his Small Catechism: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations."

Oh gosh — well, there was that time when I got sucked into a gossip session. Without thinking, I kind of went along with it, nodding my head as other said, "Can you believe she did this or said that?" But what was I really doing? I was breaking the Eighth Commandment. I neglected to stand up for the person. I failed, as Luther puts it, "to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." The plumb line of the Eighth Commandment revealed me to be not quite as upright as I thought I was.

What are some other plumb lines?

**Nation** The plumb line of poverty reveals that more than 40 million Americans live at or below the poverty line, with a significant number of those classified as living in deep poverty.

**State** The plumb line of incarceration rates reveals that Wisconsin is sending more blacks to prison than any other state, double the national average.

**City** The same plumb line reveals that the city of Milwaukee has the highest rate in the US of blacks of working age who have spent time in jail.

**Zip Code** The same plumb line of incarceration rates also reveals that the zip code of 53206, which includes some of Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood, has the highest rate of incarceration of black males for any ZIP code in the country at 62%.

There are more plumb lines. The plumb line of **segregation** reveals that Milwaukee is the third most segregated city in the country, just a point or two behind Cleveland and Detroit, with over half the population living in segregated areas.

The plumb line of **wealth inequality** reveals that the wealthiest 1 percent of American households own 40 percent of the country's wealth and that, by one measure, by 2021 70% of the nation's wealth will be in the hands of less than one percent of our nation's population. This plumb line of wealth inequality also reveals that the wealthiest 20 percent own 90 percent of the stuff in America.

The plumb line of **food inequality** reveals that 41 million people in the United States are living in food insecure households, 13 million of whom are children. This

means that 1 in 6 children, or 18%, do not have consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Listen to one story.

*Rochelle picked a great career that gave her family a comfortable lifestyle – nursing. Her family went on vacations, owned their own house, and did all those fun things you do when you have a stable job. Unfortunately, Rochelle lost her job after having some medical issues as a result of a high-risk pregnancy. Even after cashing in her 401k and selling just about everything of value, after a while there wasn't anything left. Before long she was literally out of food. To make ends meet she turned to cheap but unhealthy food. The change in diet had a dramatic effect on her kids. They didn't sleep, they lacked focus and they struggled in school.*

Hunger during the early years can have a major impact on a child's development, health, and behavior. In school, chronic hunger can cause hyperactivity, aggression, anxiety, mood swings, bullying, and higher rates of tardiness and truancy.

The plumb line of food inequality can also be applied to seniors. Senior hunger is a serious issue. Millions of seniors in the US don't have access to enough nutritious food. Some eat less or skip meals. Not having enough food can dramatically affect their health. One report shows that seniors struggling with hunger are 78% more likely to experience depression, 40% more likely to report chest pain, and 55% more likely to develop asthma.

All of these plumb lines of God's righteousness—incarceration, segregation, poverty, wealth inequality, food inequality—reveal that the structure in question is off balance, out of whack, headed for disaster. Just as I would be if I kept going along with gossip or even indulging in that myself. The disaster is the cost to human life.

What can we do? If it's mass incarceration you care about, go to [ROCWisconsin.org](http://ROCWisconsin.org), short for "Restore Our Communities," for ways to get involved. If you're concerned about food insecurity, go to [feedingamerica.org](http://feedingamerica.org) and you'll find a well-developed network of food banks across the country. Search by zip code and you'll see that we have a food bank right in our area. You know its name — Second Harvest Foodbank of Wisconsin. If you want to get involved, you don't have to go anywhere — just come to here on the last Friday of every month for the mobile food pantry. Talk to the coordinator, Lori Peppard, to find out what you can do. We have regular volunteers, but there are never enough, and in September we'll be losing some very strong arms for several months. We need another Denny until he can come back with his new shoulders.

Take a cue from God's plumb line of righteousness, and let's change the world together. There is a place for each willing heart to make a difference.