

# “The Plumb Line”

Amos 7:7-17 First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest July 10, 2022

I’ve got in my hand a plumb line, which is a tool going back thousands of years that is used in construction. A plumb line or bob-line will reveal whether something like a wall or a column is straight up-and-down, or whether it is crooked, out-of-line, or leaning one way or another.

(hang the plumb line from the lamp post)

Now this lamp post looks pretty straight, doesn’t it? But if you study the plumb line, you’ll see that it’s just a little bit off. The plumb line doesn’t lie, because it aligns itself with a power that comes unerringly from the center of the earth. This power is a primary force in the universe and is a physical law. We call it the Law of Gravity. We may choose to disregard this law, but we do so to our own detriment. We will wind up building something out of alignment, or maybe something that started out straight, but then, like the Tower of Pisa, begins to lean over.

Some people I know have plumb lines in their heads. These people, when they walk into your house, will immediately notice whether one of your pictures needs straightening. Some will feel so uncomfortable, they will walk right over and fix it! I think we all have this sensibility. It might have something to do with our sense of balance. When a person suffers from vertigo, we feel sick to our stomach. We cannot stand upright, and the world around us is spinning out of control.

For many of us, that is exactly how we are feeling after the events in Highland Park last week. We are suffering from a vertigo of our souls.

## II

In our text for this morning, God shows Amos a vision of the Lord standing beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand. “What do you see?” “A plumb line,” says Amos. And then comes the prophecy: “See—I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” The Lord promises never again to “pass by” the sins of the nation. God promises of overthrow Israel and send its people into exile. And that is exactly what happened. Thirty years after Amos delivered this message to the High Priest Amaziah and later wrote it down, the Assyrian Empire destroyed the kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, sending its people into exile. The plumb line that Amos saw the Lord holding wasn’t pointing to physical laws. It was revealing the moral law: the Law of God set forth in Scripture and concentrated in the Ten Commandments.

- You shall have no other gods before me;
- Honor your father and mother;
- And “Do not murder—do not kill.”

Moral laws govern the way we are meant to live with one another. The law set forth in Scripture is God's gift to us and not meant for punishment. It is meant to give us the means of determining right from wrong, good from evil, and life from death. As God said through his prophet Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity; death and adversity...Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live: (Dt. 30ff).

Last Monday in Highland Park, a young man with an assault rifle chose death, leaving us all staggering with shock and with sorrow, in anger and grief. Like people afflicted with vertigo, our community turned upside down.

Gun violence is nothing new in America. In 1966, a lone gunman at the University of Texas in Austin climbed into a tower and opened fire with a rifle for 96 minutes, killing 14 people (including one unborn child) and wounding 31 others. At the time, it was the deadliest mass shooting by a lone gunman in US history. But it did not long remain so. Last May, the attack on an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas by one young man armed with an assault rifle took the lives of 19 children and 2 teachers, leaving us speechless with disbelief. And over the holiday weekend, 68 people were shot in the City of Chicago. 8 of those people died. This also is not new. Even more people died the last Fourth of July weekend. Perhaps we have become numb to it all...

But what is so spectacularly tragic is what happened on the peaceful streets of our own sister-city in broad daylight, a place where we often go to dine out, to shop or to visit with friends. We're talking about the Fourth of July: a time to celebrate the best America has to offer—our freedom. We're talking about the freedom to live and not to die, and the liberty to pursue all the myriad ways to construct what is happy, and gracious, and good. Bobby Crimo was meant to be a part of that, too. He was born here, grew up here, went to school here, even attended church here. Bobby was one of us. How did we miss what was happening to him? When the Highland Police reported him as "a clear and present danger" after entering his home and confiscating over five dozen weapons, Bobby was able to legally purchase two military-style assault rifles just four months later: weapons of fearful lethality designed specifically for the battlefield. These weapons are created for one purpose: to maim and kill human beings as quickly and effectively as possible.

Bobby Crimo fired between 70 and 90 rounds from his assault rifle in little over one minute, shooting down from a rooftop on the crowds of parade-watchers. No one was able to stop him. He shot and killed 7 people, and he shot and injured 39 more, including 8 yr. old Cooper Roberts, whose spine is severed. Little Cooper will probably never walk again.

The bullets used in these rifles are designed not just to penetrate the body: they're designed to explode from within. That's why so many of Uvalde's 4<sup>th</sup> graders were later found unrecognizable. The bodies of little children weren't designed for a battlefield. They were made to be cherished, protected and loved. But this is what America has become now. And the next battlefield can erupt anywhere.

People say that this is a mental health problem—a statement with which I concur. Since the pandemic, violent crime has risen and we have more behavioral healthcare needs than ever before. Our providers are nearly maxxed out. First Presbyterian gave more than 30K in mission to address these needs in Lake County, but more needs to be done. The recent gun-control legislation coming out of Washington DC providing for more mental healthcare resources is a step in the right direction.

But there is a far bigger mental health problem we are all suffering from: one that was famously addressed in Erich Fromm's book The Sane Society. Society itself can exhibit signs of mental illness, from antisemitism and racism in general to gun violence in particular. Gun violence is not just a moral issue: it's a public health issue. And it's a mental health issue when we as a nation refuse to pass common-sense laws to reduce the scope and extent of the carnage.

Let me say this clearly: there is no place in a civilized society, in "one nation under God," for the sale and possession of military-grade assault rifles. I won't use this pulpit to debate the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. But I will, with firmness and humility, use it to point to the plumb line: to God's moral law suspended in our midst. God said, "Do not kill." The sole purpose of these fearsome weapons is to assault and kill people. That is why they must be reserved for the military and for law enforcement alone.

### Conclusion

There is another law in the New Testament, a law that is tied to Christ, whom we honor as the fulfillment of all the law. That law can be found in the Letter to the Galatians, Chapter 6, verse 2. Paul says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Friends, it seem to me that this is our task this morning, as it was borne out by so many heroic acts of selflessness last week: by mothers and fathers and grandparents willing to lay down their lives for their children; and by law enforcement, Firemen and EMT's, hospital staff, community leaders, and others who gave of their best. People came together, as so many stepped forward to help bear for others this heart-breaking burden of tragedy and loss. In the doing of that, God in Christ was honored; and out of evil, God was working for good.

We need to continue to offer ourselves this way: to the lost and the injured; to the heart-broken and bereft. We must choose those things which contribute to the life of this nation.

And to do that we must have hope. Krista Tibbit said, “Hope is a muscle.” We must exercise our hope again and again and again, not through shallow idealism or wishful thinking, but through pragmatic and untiring efforts to bring forth what we all believe in: a nation of peace and prosperity; a nation with freedom from fear; a nation of compassion and possibility where neighbors are willing to bear each other’s burdens—and if needed, to carry each other home.

That’s the America I’m going to celebrate on our next Fourth of July. May the memory of those who cannot always remain a blessing; and may we all receive Christ’s promised gift of peace, as armed with hope, we work for his peace to prevail.

-Rev. Clinton G. Roberts