

## Proper 10, Year B

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Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

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It was almost one year ago that my wife's grandfather, whom we all called PawPaw, passed away. PawPaw was a handyman, not as his vocation but as his hobby. He spent a lifetime working for Georgia Power, but on the side he loved to work with wood and built all manner of cabinets and furniture for his daughters and granddaughters. He also made sure his grandsons-in-law had good tools, too. "Now Lonnie," he would say, "a feller needs good tools."

Over the past two weekends, Jay and I have been up in Woodstock helping to clean up PawPaw's old workshop, where we were told that the grandsons-in-law could take whatever we need. I won't lie. It was like walking into the Home Depot version of Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. There were table saws, miter saws, routers, planers, and every other electric or gas powered tool you can imagine. (And yes, Roy, I do know how to use them all, and no, all of you, I am not for hire.)

Last weekend, though, something caught my eye over in the corner of the workshop. There, among all those sophisticated, complex machines, sat something tiny and shiny ... something that could easily have been overlooked. It was a small plumb bob attached to a string, otherwise known as a plumb line: a simple, ancient tool that you hang from up high to help you ensure that what you're building is perfectly straight. I found it, unwound it, and laughed to myself as I heard PawPaw's voice say, "Now Lonnie, a feller needs good tools." Sometimes the best tools are the oldest and simplest ones.

In our Old Testament reading of Amos 7:7-15 today, God says to Amos, "Amos, my people are crooked. My people are bent, and bowed, and broken, and it's time to pull out the plumb line. It's time to tear some things down, build some things up, and put things back to right. It's time to pull out the plumb line, Amos."

Over the past few weeks I've been thinking a lot about that ol' plumb line of God's and what it means to "measure up" to God's perfection. Here's what I've come to: the *one* thing we Christians *absolutely* know *for sure* is that *none* of us measure up. We are all bent, bowed, crooked, and out of line in one way or another. Even so, everywhere I look, I see plumb lines hanging like nooses. I see plumb lines hanging, and I hear the people holding them saying, "You gotta be like this. You gotta be like this, or God will not accept you. You gotta be like this, or *we* will not accept you." And yet, all the people hanging all those plumb lines seem pretty bent and broken, too, you know? So who can win? Which one is God's plumb line, and what does it mean to measure up?

Well let's start with what it means to be crooked. One place where you can easily see the bendedness and bowedness of humanity is right here in today's Gospel lesson, Mark 6:14-29. If you watch *House of Cards* on Netflix, then you'll know what I mean when I say that King Herod is the Francis Underwood of New Testament times. He is a consummate manipulator with a

thousand favors to give and ten thousand secrets to keep. He has locked up John the Baptist for sticking his nose into his marital business, and his wife Herodias is not happy. She wants their secrets kept, and she wants John the Baptist dead.

One day, Herod throws a party for all his political cronies, and he brings his daughter in to dance for them. Some of you are familiar with my favorite image of this story, which is a painting by a local Tifton artist named Vincent Keesee. I love Vincent's paintings because he has a knack for interpreting his subjects through the lens of Southern life, and there's always some element of comedy, a little something laughably risqué in each one.

In the painting, Herod looks a little like Boss Hogg, only taller. Seated on the governor's chair with a cigar in one hand, a drink in the other, and his scheming, tube-top wearing wife to his side, he watches as his scantily clad daughter dances for all his political associates. It's a raucous, raunchy scene that perfectly captures the biblical story. Herod looks pleased ... perhaps not *at* his daughter, but *because* of his daughter for the many favors she is accruing for him in that room of onlookers and sycophants.



Figure 1: "Dance of Salome," Vincent Keesee.

When she's done, you can almost hear him ask, "What would you have me do for you?" to which she offers the rehearsed response: "Bring me the head of John the Baptist. On a platter." Ever a man of his word—at least when it comes to impressing those in his court—Herod sighs and says, "Make it so." Whether you imagine King Herod as Frank Underwood or Boss Hogg, the problem is that he's got too many favors to give and too many secrets to keep.

The longer I am a pastor, the more I realize how true this is of all of us. We all have secrets to keep. We all have those things we hide deep within ourselves, deep within our families, hoping that no one will unearth them and find them out because then our cover would be blown and people might not love us. All of us are trying to look—and make others look—like we're in control, like we all conform, like we all measure up. But we don't. And our families don't. And it's killing us.

The one group of people in America these days who I think understand this perfectly are alcoholics ... specifically *recovering* alcoholics, those who speak the language of Alcoholics Anonymous. What AA figured out years ago is that the problem is not that we are all bent, bowed, and out of line. That's just part of being human. The problem is how we address it. How we deny it. How we work so hard to hide it. It's the favors we owe and the secrets we keep. The

problem may manifest in alcohol, or overeating, or abusive language, or hidden behaviors, or manipulation of the family system, but all of those are merely symptoms of the real problem: that we are imperfect, and we are terrified for anyone to find out. So, we keep our secrets buried deep, and we force others to do the same.

If you have ever been an alcoholic who has done the hard work of attaining sobriety, then you know what I mean. Or if you are the *child* of an alcoholic—whose family life was always about keeping up the façade, maintaining the family secret, never letting on that mama or daddy had a problem—then you know what I mean. It really just comes down to an awful game, a spiritual version of don't ask, don't tell. What is bent just bends more and more, often to the point of breaking completely.

One of the things I'm proud of in the Episcopal Church these days is that we suddenly seem to have arrived at a place where we're tired of keeping secrets in the family. At our General Convention a few weeks ago, they talked about the problems we have in our Church with alcohol, and they did so realistically and unashamedly. They talked about the fact that some of our faithful members happen to be gay, and they did so realistically and unashamedly. They talked about problems in our own church with race, and they did so realistically and unashamedly. They talked about the fact that we've been keeping all kinds of secrets for years, and they did so realistically and unashamedly.

But you know what else they did? They talked a LOT about Jesus, the only one who has ever measured up. They talked about what it means to let go of the old plumb lines, the very ones we've been stringing up and with which we've been strangling ourselves and those we love. They talked about being part of the *Jesus movement* and bringing healing—not conformity or conquest, but *healing*—to this bent and broken world.

Seems God is hanging his plumb line in our midst once again. What does it mean to measure up?

It means letting go of the secrets and throwing out the favors.

It means being who we are—bendedness, bowedness, and all—and loving others who do the same.

And it means remembering that there is only one perfect plumb line:

The plumb line of Jesus.

The plumb line of the Cross.

The plumb line of God's selfless, redeeming love.

“Lonnie, a feller needs good tools,” my PawPaw-in-law used to say. Sometimes the best tools are the oldest and simplest ones.