Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Amos 7:7-15 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:14-29
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
July 11, 2021 (Traditional)

The prophet Amos, in the first lesson, has a vision of God holding a plumb line next to a wall. A plumb line, if you're not familiar, is simply a fine line with a weight attached to the bottom. When you're building something you can use it to make sure your walls and corners are all vertically straight. The plumb line will always, of course, by gravity, point to the center of the earth. So it's a very helpful, simple tool. That being said, Karen and I once made the mistake of using a plumb line to hang wallpaper in a dining room that had been built in 1926. We thought "hey—start with a plumb line to make sure it's all straight." The wallpaper was perfectly straight up and down with respect to the center of the earth, but not in respect to the dining room. Over 75 years, walls tend to shift. The result was not good.

At any rate, Amos' vision of God holding the plumb line next to the wall is a warning that God is measuring Israel. It's a vision of judgment. God is the center of the universe. So any human being—or anything that we human beings do—that does not point to God as the source of all life and power—is going to be brought down, destroyed, leveled. That's the doom that Amos proclaims to Israel: "the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste."

But just picture God holding his plumb line next to your life. It's not a comforting image. If we are centered in anything else other than God, if what we do and say points to ourselves or leads us or other people to trust in idols like money or worldly security or fame, then there's going to come a day when we get straightened out. We will perish with our idols. We will experience the weight of God's law in our lives. Maybe some of us can think of a time when the crooked walls of our lives were made straight, and I don't know about you, but what I'm remembering when I say that was not pleasant.

And of course, the fact that all of us are bound in sin means that whenever God applies his perfect judgment, whenever he holds his plumb line next to us, we're going to see how crooked we are; we're going to face the fact that our accomplishments are like dust in the wind. Measured by God's standard, we're not going to fare any better than Israel did.

Now, for me, the most obvious thing when I read these lessons for today is how alien this Biblical thinking is to our world right now. Because while we're here in church talking about God's judgment and God's measuring line, by which we are all exposed as sinners…let's face it, our world today wants nothing to do with any notion of a cosmic plumb line, of final judgment or absolute measurement. The world does not want to believe in higher standards, or higher truths, which stand above us all. And this is one of the deepest causes of the obvious division and brokenness we see in the world today. What happens when we no longer believe that our loving, Savior God is the final judge over all of us? Well, everyone becomes their own final judge. Each person judging

everyone else by their own preferred standards. That's why, at least to me, the world seems so judgy and full of self-righteous behavior today. When enough people are trying to be absolute ruler of their own lives, we become little tyrants. If you don't vote like me, if you don't talk like me, if you don't see the world the way my English professor taught me to see the world, then you are THE enemy. We might say we don't believe in any absolute standard of judgment, but we sure do seem to know who we absolutely hate, don't we?

None of this should surprise us. We are coming from a different starting point as believers in Jesus Christ. We know God's plumb line. We know God's absolute standard of judgment—it's not a law, it's not a political philosophy. The absolute standard of measurement for all humanity is a person named Jesus, who also is our Savior. Jesus himself is the standard and the final judge under whom we all stand. As believers, regardless of our backgrounds, our political convictions or our tastes or preferences, we see Jesus standing in the middle of all this false worship, all the confusion of the world today. We know that he was crucified, he was pierced by nails and put on a cross as a result of the very same human politics we're seeing right now. And we know that he stood there with a love for each and every one of those people who killed him, a love that led him to empty himself out completely for them all.

We can totally see today's world in the crowd that gathered around Jesus on his last day; they were all trying to build themselves up at each others' expense. Pilate, the crowd, the Jewish religious leaders. They were all trying to score devastating hits on each other. We can just as well see ourselves standing there. And the atheists, the fundamentalists, the donkeys and elephants, the critical race theorists, the agnostics and the bigots…they're all there in that crowd. They all hate and fear each other, and they're doing all they can to gain even just one temporary hit on each other. And as believers, we can confidently say that Jesus loves today's crowd just as completely. He died for us all and gave us himself. And he did that so that we can all have access to this new starting point. This new center—this person--who we can gather around together. There is no other center than the Word through whom all things came into being. And he gives us himself as the new, final plumb line by which we can measure our lives. Jesus is risen and he is our victorious Lord. In our daily lives, we will never stop facing the truth that we don't measure up to him. Our lives are not straight. Our lives are crooked. But then we hear God's Word telling us that Jesus has traded places with us. Our final judge is the one who took our place on death row.

Amos and John the Baptist are good examples for how we can live faithfully in the world today. One of our members recently told me how what's going on right now is making her feel like she's living in a carnival fun house—you know, where the floors shift under your feet and the shape of everything is distorted by those misshapen mirrors. It's a good description of how the world can feel today. So what do you focus on when you're in the fun house? All of us might think we know the right answers to some of the problems we see in the world, and some of us might be right. But if no one is going to listen to us in the fun-house, if we're immediately pegged and judged and shouted down and put in our place, because everyone is their own final judge…well, our temptation is going to be to

get angry, confused, frustrated, pent-up, even hateful; we'll either go silent (and God doesn't want that) or we scream louder (which doesn't do any good.) In short, the temptation is to become like everyone else in the funhouse. Well look at Amos in the first lesson. Look at John in the gospel. Neither of them seem very concerned about their circumstances, do they! After being threatened by King Jeroboam, the most powerful person in the land, Amos is like, "I'm no prophet; I was just sent by God to tell the King that he is going to die by the sword." John the Baptist is not afraid of King Herod. Neither John or Amos are interested in defending themselves. It's like they have nothing to lose. Why? Because for them, everything is centered in God. Human beings can spend all their time trying to grab life for themselves and control it and build themselves up and maintain their position. In the gospel lesson we see how grotesque that game becomes. Meanwhile God creates life, he never stops giving it freely and in Jesus he even brings life out of death for us. Amos and John trust in God, not themselves. So they can let go of their lives, they can focus on God's grace and trust in his providence, they can see God's final victory even when the floor is shifting under their feet/

Amos and John are calm and steady in the fun house. And we can be that kind of presence for people, too. No need to put people down or damage them. Show that Jesus is Lord in how you act and speak. We see Jesus in the person in front of us; in our spouses, in the audience at the event, at the store, in the middle of the crowd. He's showing his kingship not with loud talk, not by building himself up and throwing verbal hand grenades at his detractors. No, he is so confident in his Father, he's so sure of his future and of his victory that he keeps on loving, keeps on giving, keeps on living into the future that he knows belongs to him, even when he's carrying a heavy cross up a hill. When we focus on Jesus, you and I can be that steady presence in the fun house.

Christians can talk about brokenness, we can deal with sin, not because we're smart and know a bunch of rules better than anyone else. We can speak to it because the one who was victorious over it has bound us to himself. We know the one who heals the wounds that sinful behavior creates. We don't have to be afraid to confess it and live lives of repentance, because we know who has the power. We can hold our crookedness up God, because he's the one who straightens us out by his own blood. What power could ever hold us down, what big boss could ever have us under his thumb, what social pressure could ever keep us quiet in the face of evil, when we know that the true king of the world is a king who bows down for us and washes us clean? That's who has the power: the One who sets us free.