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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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There is no room for entitlement in God's kin-dom.

Amos 7: 7-15
Ephesians 1: 3-14
Mark 6: 14-29
Psalm 85: 8-13

"No matter how hard we try to justify our biases and prejudices through a myopic or literal reading of scripture, what Amos and John the Baptizer are professing is that God's Law of compassion and justice isn't predicated on our whims. It's simple, yet we complicate it."

What is a critic? We have art critics, fashion critics, film critics, music critics, literary critics, social critics, political commentators, and the list goes on. It seems that for every endeavor in life, there's a critic. Webster defines a critic as someone who evaluates, analyzes, and judges a particular work. A critic tries to find fault in an effort to encourage the source of the work to strive for excellence in their endeavors. I wonder, does one grow up thinking that someday, they want to be a critic? Where does that impetus come from?

Many of us have been on the receiving end of a critical assessment, a critique of our efforts. Often meant as a means of helping another, criticism can also be a stinging rebuke that leaves those who receive the critique stunned and broken. If you've ever been criticized, you know that fight or flight feeling where you want to either defend your efforts vigorously and aggressively, or put your tail between your legs, skulk off somewhere to whine a bit and lick your wounds. Being critical is an important part of life, a necessary part if we are to grow as people, as individuals, but it needs to be done with compassion as well as conviction. This even applies to scripture.

When it comes to biblical interpretation there are several critical methodologies to employ. For example, there is the historical method as well as the literary, both of which I use when engaging scripture. So, when we look at today's reading from Amos and Mark, I not only hear the voice of a prophet giving analyses of the situation at hand, a judgment upon the principle actors, I also hear opportunity for repentance and healing. In this regard, prophets, one may say, are the early purveyors of our modern-day critics. John was born to this vocation. Amos wasn't.

John was identified in his mother's womb as the one who would prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. John's message was one of "righteousness toward one another and piety toward God." His critique of Herod was that Herod flaunted Levitical Law and social custom when he married his half-brother's wife Herodias who had a daughter Salome. Similar to the story of Jezebel who plotted to kill the prophet Elijah, Herodias isn't having John the Baptizer stirring trouble for her and inciting rebellion against Herod's rule. The result was someone's head on a platter, which is a good reminder that a prophet's job is risky.

Amos, on the other hand, was content to tend his orchards, caring for his fig-bearing trees. Amos didn't seek out to be a professional prophet, which at the time, was common. That's why Amos answers the priest Amaziah's charge of conspiring against Jeroboam by first declaring that he wasn't a prophet by trade, but when God's grace falls upon you, you gird yourself and tend to the task you're given. And his task is not easy one.

Imagine you're the recent hire at a multi-national company. You enjoy your work and co-workers. Things are going along well. However, you have started to notice that some of your co-workers are being bullied by management. Safety concerns are being ignored in lieu of profit margins. Workers are being unfairly laid off and their work is being placed upon others whose plates are already too full with management's expectations. Something within you stirs at the ethical and moral injustice that you are witnessing. Now imagine you walk into the boardroom. Your supervisor is there. Your manager and their boss. Even the head of the corporation is there as well as the chair of board. You begin to share your grievances, listing off a series of offences that they are perpetuating. They begin trying to discredit you, to say you don't know what you're talking about; that you need to remember your place. But you persist

and warn them if they don't change their course, calamity will befall the company. That's what Amos is doing: speaking truth to power.

Amos is confronting the king, his advisors and even his priest. Amos may not have the credentials of the professional critic, but he nonetheless speaks from the heart as a messenger of God. And he isn't doing so without a guiding principle by which he is holding the powers that be accountable. That's the plumb line we hear about: a rule by which all things are measured against. It is good to note here that the word we read as plumb line refers in actuality to an instrument of force – like a hammer. This is something forceful and irreducible. This instrument of measure by which all things are held accountable is none other than God's Law. It is a boundary maker by which those responsible for the care and wellbeing of the people are held to. Amos is saying that God's justice is over humankind's notion of justice or any government's idea of justice. Too often the powers that be trample on the needs of the poor in an effort to gain entitlement and privilege. And what is this measure that Amos is suggesting?

There are several ways to answer this question. But the simplest way is to recall what the prophet Micha summarily says that God desires (Mic 6.8f): to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Similarly, from Deuteronomy (6.5f): you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. Together these words summarize the whole of Torah. This is the benchmark that Amos is holding Jeroboam and company accountable to. It is a constructive measure by which the least among us is treated not only fairly or equitably, but justly. The powerful must never lord it over the poor. Rather, they must seek to alleviate the plight of the disempowered and voiceless.

Now, as followers of Jesus, it is added to this understanding that you are to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19.18, Mk 12.31). That is the measure by which we as Christians are held accountable to. What this is saying is we can't flaunt God's Law, which supersedes church canons as well as civic regulations – in other words, the law of the land. Nor ought we base those civil laws on select biblical principles, on those passages that meet our preferences. That's what Jeroboam and Harod were doing. There is no thwarting the prophetic voice. No matter how hard we try to justify our biases and prejudices through a myopic or literal reading of

scripture, what Amos and John the Baptizer are professing is that God's Law of compassion and justice isn't predicated on our whims. It's simple, yet we complicate it.

Harod and Jeroboam complicated matters to suit their personal preferences at the expense of the marginal and at great cost to the poor. There is no justice when prejudice enters the equation. There is no justice when the least among us are vilified and scapegoated. The powerful have an obligation to care for the least among us. Exploitation of another or creation is anathema God's desire for a just and righteous relationship. The needs of the poor and marginalized must never be victim to the greed of the powerful and wealthy. There is no room for entitlement in God's kin-dom.

Thus, I am left asking myself: How do I measure up to the plumb line? How do my words and actions measure to God's expectation of justice? How does your life measure according to this plumb line?