

Leading Lines
16th Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 19, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

I Corinthians 3:9-16 (CEB)
Amos 7:1-9, 9:8-14 (NLT)

In the middle ages, the coastline of Italy was well-known as the place to trade and make a fortune. In the merchant republics, wealthy families competed to be elected to the high office, called “il capitano del Popolo” – the captain of the people – in Pisa and Florence. In the 12th century, the Republic of Pisa was at the height of its wealth and power. To show its grandeur, the Archbishop and the Captain of the People collaborated on building a grand tower behind the cathedral, a monument to the glory of God’s blessings made manifest in the Republic. Its position was chosen to allow it to serve as a bell tower for the cathedral, but little attention was paid to the quality of the soil on which the foundation was laid in 1173. Just five years later, as construction had progressed to the second floor, it was obvious that one side of the tower was sinking into the ground. Yet, for the next hundred years, the Tower of Pisa sat at just two stories of height, as the funds needed for its construction were thrown instead into the wars with Genoa, Lucca, and Florence. Construction resumed, however, and the later architects took the odd foundation into account, making one side of the tower taller than the other, causing the tower to curve toward being straight. By the time of its completion, nearly two hundred years had passed – and the bells weren’t completely installed for another hundred years! By that time, the Republic of Pisa that had commissioned its construction had fallen, literally selling itself to the Republic of Florence for 200,000 gold florins.¹

This tower, of course, is the famous “Leaning Tower of Pisa” – a tower that has been leaning over since its construction began, nine centuries ago. Its

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Pisa

foundation was flawed, but from its base has emerged an iconic building, immediately recognizable and beautiful because of its flawed start. Somehow, this tilting building has survived earthquakes, storms, and centuries of tourists walking up and down its stairs, and after the addition of a lead counterweight in the 1990s, it is hoped to continue to last through the next centuries as well.² Its lines lead the eyes upwards towards heaven, just as most bell towers do, but also remind us of human folly and inspired ingenuity.

Now, in order to discover just how far the tower was leaning, the builders likely used an ancient tool – a plumb line. It's a very simple, but very practical device, consisting of a small but heavy weight at the end of a string. This heavy weight is called a plumb bob in English, as a corruption of the Latin "plumbum" or "lead". Once the plumb bob comes to a rest, hanging in the air, it shows an absolutely true vertical line. This vertical line acts to lead the builders in making each floor level, and has been used since antiquity in this way.

In the Bible, the prophet Amos receives a series of visions from God, each heralding the destruction of Israel. In two cases, Amos asks God to forgive Israel, and God averts the disaster – but in one vision, God shows Amos a plumb line, held by a wall. God says to Amos, "I will test my people with this plumb line. I will no longer ignore all their sins." To this, Amos has no reply; it is clear to him that the wall is not true to the line, and likewise, that the sin of the people is not aligned with God's plan.

People are often out of alignment with God's plans – and this seems to be a common message that God communicates to us. When Daniel is called to interpret the writing on the wall to King Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, the message inscribed there is "You have been weighed, you have been measured, and you have been found wanting."³ Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, helps us understand what God wants from us in the series of six "you have heard it said... but I say to you" statements (Matthew 5:21-48). John of Patmos writes in Revelation 11 that he was

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leaning_Tower_of_Pisa

³ Daniel 5

given a “measuring rod, like a staff” and told to “measure the temple of God and the altar, and those who worship there,” with the clear implication that all who were there would “measure up.”

And then, there's Paul. In his first letter to the fractious church of Corinth, Paul uses a building metaphor that harkens back to Amos' vision of the plumb line. Here, he claims that all of the church has Jesus as its foundation, and each build on top of the foundation by following different teachers. Even following the right teachers, though, you can still build with the wrong materials for the job. Building with gold sounds great, but it's soft – it's not meant for the task. Likewise, wood is wonderful for construction, but may not stand against a blazing fire. Paul tells them that their building will be tested – and if it survives, they'll be rewarded, and if not, they'll lose the building, but will themselves be saved, since their foundation is Jesus.

Admittedly, Paul's concern here is that people are separating themselves into factions and calling each other out. He's trying to show that everyone in the church is saved by the foundation of Jesus, while the factions would be wise to listen to people like him, who are “wise master builders.” After all, you don't want to have built up a house that is unstable! And, unlike the tower of Pisa, the edifice of faith that is built by each of us has a stable foundation. We don't have to build in special ways, or rebalance later – we know that it is solid at the base. We still need to measure our lives according to God's plans, however – and if we forget to check against the plumb line of God's word, then it'll take extra effort to get back to true. Our lives should be filled with leading lines that point to God's influence on us and the world.

Amos, you see, was functioning as a plumb line in the northern kingdom of Israel. He was the first prophet to write his prophecy down, coming before the better-known prophets of Isaiah and Jeremiah. He was not a “professional prophet,” paid by the king to keep people happy with prophecies of grandeur and success. Instead, he grew up as a fig-orchard-keeper and shepherd in the southern kingdom of Judah. Just as God called the Judges from amidst the people before the

establishment of the kingdom, Amos was called from his life in Judah to go to Israel and proclaim truth to the corrupt leadership. He was a plumb line, and had the kings and nobles of Israel listened to his words, they could have returned their nation to true alignment with God. Instead, their work came tumbling down, as the fruit of their evil deeds led to the destruction of their cities and the exile of their people throughout Assyria.

A plumb line helped fix the leaning tower of Pisa, too. It took work to get the tower to stay up – and its uniqueness ended up being a major asset. Even though the Republic of Pisa no longer existed – and the archbishop and captain of the people who commissioned the building were not around to see it – in the 1600s, the last bell was added to the tower, marking its construction complete. The bells didn't line up with the center of the tower, of course, but did manage to peal in glory of God throughout the city, and still do to this day. The belfry didn't need to be perfectly aligned to act as a leading line to God. Likewise, the towers we build of our lives, no matter how far they lean, God always knows how to return us to true.

When Amos acted as a plumb line for Israel, it wasn't just about destruction. His prophecy ends with a hopeful word from God, reminding the people that God will restore the people, and will “repair the damaged walls.” “The time will come when those harvesting the grain and grapes will overlap with those planting it” - that the land will be so fruitful that food and security will be available year round. God promises to rebuild the walls directly – to provide the security that the people desperately need – but at the same time, the “exiled people” will return and “rebuild their ruined cities.” Where Paul describes building from the same foundation, Amos promises that people will build their own homes within the security of the same walls – it's a similar message of individuality within the unity and promise of God.

So let us continue to build the towers of our lives, with leading lines that point to God's love for the world. Let us build on the foundation of Jesus, following the plans that God has designed – and allow the Spirit to help us find ways to return to true when we go astray. Amen.