

Questions Galore

Each week the revised lectionary offers at least four suggestions, sometimes more, for scriptures to use with the worship service liturgy: at least one Psalm, a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, one from a Gospel and one from one of the Epistles. Usually, there is an underlying theme connecting these readings, at least in the mind of the committee which selected them. Or there may be an event or reference which anchors them. This week, it seems that what connect many passages are the questions asked which God expect to be answered. Amos' vision in chapter 7 begins with God's asking "Amos, what do you see?" The reading from Luke's gospel has a lawyer testing Jesus with the question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answers are obvious. We certainly know what the answer is. It seems that all of my life I have heard the saying that there is no such thing as a stupid question. This is often said to encourage questions from confused students so that clarification can be made ensuring that understanding of new teachings is complete. This openness to questioning keeps those who quickly grasp a new teaching from belittling those who do not. Yet sometimes, the answers to the questions being asked are SO obvious. But, perhaps the answers are not easy, or at least their implications are not easy or always readily apparent for some reason. That is clear from the passages that we read today. It doesn't require much reading from the prophet Amos to see that he was not a happy man. He certainly was not the bearer of good news. And the root of his unhappiness lies in the vision underlying the question which began our reading about the plumb line. God is standing by a wall built with a plumb line. The plumb line is known to be a devise used to keep buildings erected correctly on their foundations. The pronouncement is that a plumb line set in the midst of Israel reveals their foundations are not build correctly; God's judgment is coming. Amos, a Judean, is sent to deliver this message to Israel. Amos recognizes not only what the Lord holds in his hand, but what the plumb line which always falls straight, which always shows the true way the wall should stand illustrates about the Lord's indictment of Israel. The pronouncement is made that the plumb line is to be set in the midst of the people Israel is coming judgment. The answer: A plumb line; is easy. The implications are not and become complicated. Amos, not-a-prophet in his own mind, must speak the word of the Lord give to him. Amos, that herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, must voice a word of judgment to earthly powers. He is none too happy with his proclamation, or rather with duty to take it to Israel. The plumb line of God's law provides the guidance, the rule, the standard—but Amos is the one who must employ that plumb line—take that message—and face the consequences of his unpopular pronouncement. Amos left his home in Judah and took his message to Israel. The remainder of our passage concerns his interaction with the priest at the temple that the king had built at Bethel when the United Kingdom split. There the priest at Bethel told Amos: "O seer, go, flee away to the land

of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Amos, of course, did not listen. He continued to speak the word of God about God's plumb line. God's plumb line still holds as the true measure of the foundation upon which lives and societies should be built. The question for us, is if God set his plumb line in the midst of us, what would be the result, and what are we doing about it? Scripture reminds us there are many places and things where we worship, and to which we give allegiance but it is God's plumb line which applies in all places. We know what the plumb line is, but do we see all the places where God would have us set it in our midst? As I said, questions galore, in the passages this Sunday. What about that lawyer who wanted to test Jesus? I suspect he did not hesitate to show what he knew. When Jesus asks him, "What is written in the law?" I am sure he is confident and thinks, "I've got this." The lawyer can recite every word, and yet, though obvious and known, the lawyer fails to grasp the expansive nature of what he recited. God's questions that evoke obvious answers do not garner us an easy "A" in faithfulness or an exemption from living their radical ramifications. We often don't really want an obvious answer to our God-questions when we ask for a "sign" for what we should do. Claiming that we don't know God's will enables us to continue in our own ways. Ambiguity allows us to dodge the responsibility that comes with knowing what God expects of us. But God rarely keeps holy expectations under wraps. Jesus says, "I have told you plainly." From the parables to the teachings, to the commandments to love and care for others throughout his ministry we are told what is expected from those who follow him. And throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God repeats, "I have shown you, O mortal, what I require." (*Micah 6: 8—“He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*) God's plumb line is evident and reveals all we need to know about building our lives and constructing communities and shaping things on earth as they are in heaven. Does that phrase sound familiar? Does that sound like what Jesus kept saying when he proclaimed the kingdom of God was near? In Luke's narrative, the lawyer has given the correct answer to his own question to Jesus about inheriting eternal life. Jesus told him he could find it written in the law; summed up in the basic commandments about placing love for God first and then loving your neighbor as yourself. The lawyer's second question of "And who is my neighbor?" led to the parable of the Good Samaritan because it revealed his knowledge of the obvious answer to the question he had asked was not sufficient for him to follow Jesus' instruction to "do this, and you will live." After hearing this astonishing tale of the victim of the robbers who was passed by with no aid being given by both a priest and a Levite, only to receive help from a despised Samaritan would have come as a shock to the lawyer. Because of the location, on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, the injured man was like Jewish, like the priest and the Levite. Most of those traveling the road would have been Jewish. The lawyer would not have expected a Samaritan, an ethnic group with which Jews had a long standing enmity, to provide aid. Yet that is what happened. So when that lawyer,

probably very pleased with himself at his erudite, pious knowledge of the law, when asked by Jesus that next question, he must have been caught short with the next obvious answer he must give. At the end of the parable, Jesus asks: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer does not need to think, not really. He knows the answer. It is obvious: the one who showed mercy. Did you notice however, that the lawyer could not bring himself to name the one who showed mercy? He does not say, "The Samaritan". It is as if he cannot bear to voice the obvious answer to that question. He seems to want to dodge the implications, the upending, distasteful, shocking answer, obvious answer that it is the hated other, the Samaritan, who is truly the neighbor and therefore the one who inherits eternal life. Often the answers to God's questions for us turn our expectations, and our lives, upside down if we do what we know they ask of us. We do not really want a plumb line that reveals how far off the mark we've fallen in what we have built. We do not really want to know, not really, who God includes, loves and calls. We do not want to voice the obvious answers to God's basic questions of faith and life because when we do, we must reckon with whether we will pretend ignorance or we will follow God's direction. For at the end of the parable, Jesus' final word to the lawyer was: "Go and do likewise." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.