

Title: Our Spiritual Life, a Mobius Strip  
Date: 7/12/2022 (Proper 10, Year C)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Amos 7:7-17](#); [Psalm 82](#); [Colossians 1:1-14](#); [Luke 10:25-37](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/86Ffdczoc70?t=1291>

O God,  
    please grant us knowledge and understanding  
        of the things we ought to do,  
    and the grace and power  
        to faithfully accomplish them.<sup>1</sup> Amen.

The short prayer I just prayed is a paraphrase of this week's Collect of the Day. This is a prayer I feel that I can, and probably should, pray every morning when I open my eyes.

When we pray this prayer,  
    we recognize  
        that knowledge and understanding go hand in hand with action.

When we pray this prayer,  
    we remind ourselves  
        that one cannot be fully expressed without the other.

We don't fully understand, or fully know, the things we ought to do  
    until we try to do something with that knowledge and understanding.

For example,  
    I confess that I don't **really** know  
        the scripture assigned for any given Sunday  
        until I try to preach on those readings.  
        And as we take yet another turn  
            in our three-year cycle of readings,  
            each time I encounter  
                that prophecy,  
                or parable,  
                or those verses,  
            I understand them a little more,  
                sometimes a little differently.

The first time I heard the phrase "plumb line"  
    I thought it had to do with plumbing,  
    that Amos was referring to some kind of water pipe.

Then I learned  
    that it is a weight suspended from a string,  
    and that it helps measure how vertical a wall is.

This time,  
    what stood out to me  
    is that it's not just a tool of measurement,

it is also used by God  
as a tool of judgment.

Likewise,  
the actions we take may not be the “things we ought to do”  
or the best possible way of accomplishing the “things we ought to do”  
if we lack knowledge and understanding.

To continue with the same analogy,  
I might not write the best possible sermon  
if I don’t understand the purpose of preaching,  
or if I don’t know how to connect the readings  
to what y’all might want to hear  
or need to hear.

I might end up talking about ancient construction methods  
rather than the prophecy of Amos.  
Today I might miscalculate where I land  
on that spectrum between Amos and Amaziah,  
between being a prophet **of** the Kingdom of Heaven  
and a prophet working **for** worldly authorities.

Parker Palmer,  
a Quaker author known for his spiritual writings and initiatives,  
uses the image of a mobius strip  
to describe this dynamic  
between what we take in from the world,  
knowledge and understanding,  
and what we put out into the world,  
doing the things we ought to do.

A mobius strip looks like it has TWO sides,  
but when you run your fingers along the surface,  
you realize there is no “inside” and “outside”,  
there is only ONE side.

According to Palmer,  
every day  
we choose what we bring forward from ourselves.

Whether we choose to act out anger or compassion,  
greed or generosity,  
fear or faith,

“those choices shape the outer world.  
And then the world throws stuff back at us ...  
and we make choices  
about how we internalize and appropriate them.”<sup>2</sup>

How we take in all that’s happening around us  
affects what we choose to put out into the world,  
and so on.

This is an endless cycle.

As Palmer describes it,  
our task is to  
“become more aware  
of the points of interaction  
that allow us to ‘make choices that are, on balance,  
more life-giving than death-dealing.’”<sup>3</sup>

On balance,  
when something happens to us,  
do we act out anger or compassion,  
greed or generosity,  
fear or faith?  
to our loved ones,  
to our neighbors,

Are we infusing life, or are we imposing death, or a fate worse than death?

Given today’s gospel,  
when we think about what brings life and what brings death,  
we’re not just thinking about that for ourselves,  
but for our neighbors as well.

Before we continue, I want to make it clear  
that it is SO important to feel our feelings,  
whether we think we should be feeling it or not.

It is important to be aware of and name  
each feeling that we are feeling,  
whether as conscious thought or  
a sensation in our body,

It is important to recognize  
the anger that causes us to shake and cry,  
the grief that causes us to withdraw into ourselves,  
the greed that causes us to wrongly order,  
to wrongly prioritize,  
the desires we act on,  
and the fear that causes us to lash out  
without understanding the actual source of the threat.

If we don’t feel our feelings,  
if we simply push it to the back or push it down,  
we end up playing a game of whack-a-mole;  
they will simply pop up somewhere else.  
When the cycle of internal thoughts  
and external actions  
becomes THAT kind of cycle,  
life becomes exhausting.

At this point, I have good news and bad news.

Bad news, we are human. It is inevitable that we will feel anger, and greed and fear. Whether intense or mild, a quick flash or a long stretch, we will feel those kinds of negative feelings. None of us are immune.

Good news, we are human.

We are created in the image of God.

With God's help,

we can tap into our capacity for compassion, for generosity and faith. We can better understand and know

the "things we ought to do."

With God's help,

our mobius strip will not be weighed down

because it lacks the energy of life.

Instead, it will be alive and dancing with the breath of the Spirit.

The words of Amos are harsh.

The words of Amos are judgmental.

It's uncomfortable to think about God making our high places desolate,  
speaking as a church built on top of a hill.

It's unpleasant to think about God

laying waste to our sanctuaries

and rising against our houses with a sword.

But when churches are empty,

when sanctuaries are run down

did God do that,

or did that happen

because God's people did not know or understand

what God was calling them to do,

because we did not accomplish the things we ought to do.

When it comes to prophets and prophecy,

it's important to remember

that the words of ancient Hebrew prophets

**aren't** meant to tell the future;

they **are** meant to paint a clear picture

of what is happening **right now**.

They feel compelled by God

to illustrate how much God's people

have diverged from the path laid out by God,

even if the people they are speaking to don't want to hear it.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel,

whose modern day equivalent would be

our dean at Washington National Cathedral,

painted Amos as a conspirator against the king.  
He claimed that the land is not able to bear Amos's words.  
\*whisper\* maybe he was projecting.

He worried more about making the king comfortable  
than helping the king know and understand the things he ought to do. He worried  
more about maintaining the status quo  
than reminding the king to faithfully look to God  
for the grace and power to move his people  
closer to the plumb line that God has set among them.

He was a prophet for the king, not a prophet for God.

Amaziah declared  
that these words spoken by Amos  
shouldn't be spoken in the king's sanctuary  
or in the most sacred place of the kingdom.  
Yet it is because those words were neither spoken nor heard  
in those places of power, that Israel eventually found itself in exile.

This isn't about assigning blame,  
except to shift us away from the mindset  
that God makes or lets bad things happen to us.  
We humans can royally muck things up ourselves,  
especially when certain ways  
of knowing and understanding the things we ought to do,  
"the way things should be done"  
"the way things have always been done"  
are reinforced and remain unquestioned  
over many generations.

Every Sunday,  
when we gather for worship  
we hear the word of God  
so that we might better know and understand  
the things we ought to do,  
not just as individuals, but as a people.  
Together we pray  
for the power and grace of God to be with us  
as we seek to accomplish those things.

Every day, when we encounter other people,  
such as the modern-day equivalent of a herdsman  
and a dresser of sycamore trees  
and those we consider our Samaritans,  
our most hated and most despised enemies,  
let us humbly listen for the hard truths about our shortcomings  
spoken by a prophet of God.

Jesus had summed up all the commandments  
into the Two Great Commandments.  
He was so good at teaching this that even the lawyer who challenged him,  
that scholar of the scriptures,<sup>4</sup> could recite them,  
"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your  
soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as  
yourself."  
He knew and understood what he ought to do,  
AND he was still looking for a loophole.  
He wanted to justify the exceptions he was already making in his mind,  
rather than ask God for grace and power  
to accomplish that which he could not do alone.

When we think about our neighbors,  
let us dream bigger,  
let us draw the circle wider.  
The world as it is does not have to stay the way it is.  
Through Jesus,  
God rescued us from death so we can bring life.  
Through Jesus,  
God sought to move us  
more fully into the image of God,  
and this world  
more fully into the Kingdom of God.  
May these be the fruits that we bear.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from the Collect of the Day: [http://lectionarypage.net/YearC\\_RCL/Pentecost/CProp10\\_RCL.html](http://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp10_RCL.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/yds-parker-palmer-urges-soul-work-animate-social-change>

<sup>3</sup> <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/yds-parker-palmer-urges-soul-work-animate-social-change>

<sup>4</sup> John Hall, D. (2010). [Theological Perspective on Luke 10:25–37](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 3, p. 238). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.