

## **Doing Nothing Is Not An Option**

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, July 11, 2010)

Amos 7:7-17 <sup>7</sup>This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; <sup>9</sup> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

<sup>10</sup>Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. <sup>11</sup>For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”

<sup>12</sup>And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; <sup>13</sup>but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

<sup>14</sup>Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, <sup>15</sup>and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ <sup>16</sup> “Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’

<sup>17</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.’”

Luke 10:25-37 <sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>He said to him, “**What is written in the law? What do you read there?**” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “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.” <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, “**You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.**”

<sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, “**A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “**Go and do likewise.**”**

I know a Jewish man who is married to a German woman. When their baby was born they asked if I could do some kind of blessing for the baby. They didn’t want the baby baptized – after all, the father was Jewish, although I don’t think he had been in the synagogue or in any kind of worship service for years. I don’t think he even knows what foods are kosher or not. But he did not want the baby baptized. And she did not want the baby ritually circumcised. They are a modern couple, so that had been antiseptically done in the hospital by medical professionals. They wanted me to do a blessing, but they didn’t know what they wanted. So we did nothing.

As the child grew and began to talk, the father was very happy to learn German and help the child also speak German. He thought it was important that the child be rooted in his mother’s culture, but they did nothing that would help the child grow in faith. And then the mother experienced loss in her life, and at a time when she was grieving she met another Christian pastor who touched her heart. This often happens when we feel a deep spiritual need – our hearts are opened to God or God’s message. I could see that she yearned for a spiritual dimension in their family, and for their child, but the father smiled and said, “my ticket has been punched.” Just so you don’t miss his point, he is claiming that as a descendant of Abraham, he doesn’t need to do anything else for salvation – or as he says, his “ticket” has been punched, he is guaranteed entrance into heaven, just because he is a child of Abraham. I suggested that he might want to read some of his own Jewish writings, especially the prophets, and our Old Testament Prophet for this morning would be one of the best.

Amos was not part of the religious establishment. As Amos said, in response to Amaziah, the official prophet, who was appointed by the king, “I am not a prophet, nor a prophet’s son” which means he had no part of the “official” guild of prophets. He told Amaziah that he was simply a shepherd of the sheep and a tree trimmer, or in the understanding of that day, a common, lowly farm-hand. But God gave Amos a message for the people of Israel. Listen to just a few verses from Amos 2:

For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
Because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—

<sup>7</sup> They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way;

I really don’t know exactly what Amos was condemning, although he is speaking out against the leaders of Israel, and maybe even the temple leadership. These words are poetic and may well refer to some kind of symbolic acts, perhaps even acts of worship, but the point is that the king’s prophet, Amaziah, did not want to hear it. He wanted Amos to keep quiet, to go home, to stop his prophesy. But doing nothing was not an option for Amos, just as doing nothing to help the poor was not an option for the Jews of his day, and just as doing nothing is not really an option for my Jewish friend today.

And yet, in many ways, we are no better. We may feel that our church membership is our Christian equivalent of having our ticket punched. And we don’t really want to get involved. Or maybe we can look back to a wonderful conversion experience, a time when we truly came to know our Lord, and we think that we are all set for the rest of our life, and we do nothing.

I wonder if the lawyer who came to Jesus with his question about inheriting eternal life had that same attitude. Do you think he might have felt that since he was a descendent of Abraham his ticket to eternal life was assured? And in addition to being a descendant of Abraham, he had the right answers. He knew his Bible, he could quote the right verses for Jesus. But he was looking for a loophole. Maybe he was hoping there would be an excuse for doing nothing. So Jesus told a story about three men. Two of them certainly had the right qualifications. They were descendants of Abraham – they could have claimed that they had their ticket punched. The priest certainly knew the right answers – he was a teacher, a leader of the Israelites, one who led God’s people in worshipping God. But as Jesus told the story, the priest did nothing – he passed by on the other side. The Levite, a descendant of Levi, also had a very special dispensation, in the eyes of the Jewish people. When the Jewish people came into the Promised Land, every tribe received a portion of the land, but not the Levites. They didn’t have to grow crops, tend vineyards and shepherd the sheep. They were the keepers of God’s word, the caretakers of the tabernacle, and in time, the temple and all the altars where God would be worshiped. Again, we can understand why the Levite did nothing. His ticket was punched – he could look on the man in the gutter, and do nothing, because, after all, he had to maintain his holiness, and so he passed by on the other side. The third man was really an outcast. We have attached the word “good” to Samaritan so often – we even have “good Samaritan” laws, that we forget how much the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. They were considered impure, they had perverted the faith, they certainly were not holy or spiritual. But as Jesus told the story, the Samaritan was the one who did something, he went down into the gutter, he showed compassion by helping, maybe even at some personal risk.

Where do you fit in this story? I certainly hope we have no priests and Levites among us, but I suspect that we have some who try to get away with doing nothing. Whenever you see a need and pass by on the other side, ask yourself where you are going. Are you keeping yourself clean, are you avoiding danger by not taking any undue risk, or are you just using that as an excuse to do nothing? Some have suggested that we are the man at the side of the road, beaten and left for dead. Maybe that has happened to each one of us at some time, so we need to ask ourselves if we are willing to even be touched by a Samaritan. Are we willing to be lifted up and placed on his donkey or mule, and bounced all the way to town with every bruise and knife wound screaming at us in pain, or would we rather just lay there in the gutter and complain about the thieves along the road?

Or can we be the Samaritans? Some have suggested that belonging to the United Church of Christ makes us Samaritans to some. We are not a pure people – we accept all kinds of folks into our churches, no we more than accept them, we welcome them as one of us. We do not keep ourselves holy – some would say that our worship is not contemporary enough, or not spiritual enough, or not liturgical enough. OK, maybe that is true, but I sincerely hope that we would act like Samaritans, especially the Samaritan in Jesus’ story. I sincerely hope and pray that we would cross the road to find those who are in need, that we would be willing to take risks, to sacrifice, to give, to help, because really, doing nothing is not an option for those who follow Jesus. Amen.