

We live in a world of shifting standards. Often we are mystified --- not knowing what to expect --- or what is expected. We long for guidelines, or even rules; so we can operate in the security of knowing we are doing the right thing.

Oddly enough, we are more clear about what we aren't, especially as congregations in this chaotic time. We know what we want and don't want; what we like and dislike. Sometimes we lose sight of who and what we are; to whom we belong. The old patterns don't fit, and we don't know what to do. We become very tentative about suggesting anything different; even fear about stepping away from generations of practice.

As people of faith we are caught in a dilemma. We treasure the traditions, hymn, rites we have practiced for so long. They offer comfort in a world that is constantly changing. At the same time, we long for the energy and enthusiasm of new believers; the eagerness to share the good news of the gospel.

Amos was called to proclaim a warning to his people. He argued with Yahweh about his vocation. The people had strayed away from Yahweh's commands. Their worship had become corrupt. Amos was given the vision of a plumb line measuring a wall. [I remember well my father constructing a closet in our home that was then about 100 years old, complaining about the difficulty in getting things plumb in a structure that had shifted over the years.] Amos was calling his people back to God's standards. He was calling them to right worship; getting life into plumb with God at the center.

Jesus was confronted by a lawyer with an apparently simple question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Wisely, Jesus turned that question back on the speaker asking what the scripture/law said. The lawyer dutifully recited "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus commended the man and encouraged him to follow that great commandment.

The lawyer was not satisfied. He continued to question Jesus. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus then told the man the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. That story subtly reminded the man of the law of hospitality so important to that society. I think Jesus was also saying: You are asking the wrong question. You are attempting to obtain your own salvation. You are missing the point. Salvation is a gift of God. You don't earn it. You respond to it in living as God guides you.

The real question - and the question before us as this point in time - is What does it mean to be faithful? How does an individual and a congregation develop a faithful lifestyle.

The reality of our time is that churches are no longer the center of community life as they were in the early days of our country's development. Our towns and cities have grown and developed and provided resources for personal growth that exceed the ability of the churches of our time. We are challenged to discover what it means to love God totally in our time. We are called to discover how we can make meaningful God's love as we live in a world that cannot keep from war; a nation that forgets its basic unity.

Our call is about more than "doing good". It is time to make a difference; to transform our society and world. That puts us in an uncomfortable place. It is time for people of

faith to name the issues that surround us: hunger, homelessness, rising crime and violence, low employment, inadequate wages, the sense of hopelessness that so many of our citizens experience. Our role may be to not only claim, but to insist on a better life for everyone. It goes beyond keeping the rules, the laws, the practices that shield us from naming the pain.

Our call is to claim our voices. Our call is to become informed: to read a variety of viewpoints open to grasping the concerns and arguments; to attend forums designed to address the issues - knowing we will be troubled and offended by what is said. To speak up and to speak out when we see individuals being mistreated by the law, in the workplace, or even down the street. Our call is to claim our power as citizens of community and nation and the kingdom of God, taking the risks of being faithful; addressing the systems that harm and diminish the possibilities for abundant life.

The message to that lawyer, who was looking for an easy way to enter God's kingdom, is: Make that Great Commandment a rule for every moment of your life. Trust God's leading. Accept God's gifts - of vision and strength and emotion. Give thanks for your ability and freedom to act. May we also claim that rule.

Amen.