

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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Amos 7:7-17, Luke 10:25-37  
Hard Stories to Hear

Amos got a raw deal. He was just a farmer and herder. Yet he got called to tell the people a story that was hard to hear. He had to proclaim the judgment of God. “Desolation, waste laying, and destruction with the sword is coming.” And then the story gets worse: “your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, your sons and your daughters will be murdered, your land will given away; you will die a terrible death, and the whole country will go into exile.” A hard story to hear!

Jesus tells a story about a man beaten and robbed of even his clothing and left to die by robbers. And then the story gets worse: Two people come along and see him lying there. Not only do they not help him, they cross over to the other side of the road to pass him by! A hard story to hear! And we hear a lot of hard stories every day, don't we? We could get overwhelmed by all the bad news.

But there is good news in both these stories too. A good Samaritan comes along and helps the man who has been left for dead. He not only bandages up his wounds, he transports him to an inn, pays two days wages for the innkeeper to take care of him, and promises to repay the innkeeper for any other expenses he incurs when he returns! In his actions he loves his neighbor. This is a good story to hear.

Amos tells the people that they have trampled on the poor and pushed aside the needy. They have let injustice reign. But if they will just, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” If they do that, everything will be restored, prosperity will come, God will ensure their every need is met. Amos weaves a truly good story to hear.

I just love talking to all of you. I learn so much, I am so uplifted and encouraged, my spirituality is deepened, and I am fascinated by your dedication, hopes and dreams for Hillcrest and for your lives, your families, friends and community. Here are a couple of example snap shots:

In the adult study I hear questions and comments from people who are seeking God’s will in their lives, who are delving into the stories in the Bible to find the treasures that connect to our every day lives. These are faithful people, exploring what it means to be God’s people here and now. Now each of them have bad news in their lives, and tell hard stories to hear. But they have chosen to focus and center on the good stories and the good news.

In the small groups meetings I hear stories about your past. Things that have happened; that were fun and fulfilling, things that were difficult and hurtful and from which you have endeavored to learn lessons to be better people, and a better church together. I have heard bad news and hard stories to hear. But as you share

and listen to each other I also hear dreams and ideas for your future. I can hear the good stories to come.

In talking with you individually I hear bad news and hard stories about lost jobs, declining health and broken relationships. But I also hear good stories and good news of hope. I hear about healing of bodies, hearts, minds, spirits and relationships. I hear about new adventures in education and travel. I hear about the love you have for spouse, children, grandchildren, friends.

“One gift I have been given is I have the best friends.” “Our daughter is here on her summer break. She gives us so much help and is so patient and dedicated to taking care of us.” “My grandson is so bright, and capable. He is doing so well in school and has a good job.” “My sister has recovered and is going home soon. She thanks all of you for your prayers of love and support.”

“My son called me on my birthday. He has never done that. We had a good long talk for the first time ever.” “My surgery went so well I am up and around without any pain!” “The reason I come to Hillcrest is because I love the people. I have made such wonderful friends here.” “My son lost his job, another one of those lay offs we hear about. But on the way home he stopped and talked to some people and got another one! He has the most uncanny ability to keep going.”

“We are going to visit our families. They live far away but want us to come. It is so exciting to get to go and be with them after such a long time away.” “My

son regularly engages in random acts of kindness. He stopped to rescue a cat from the freeway. He reads a newspaper article about someone who needs a bicycle, goes out and finds one he can repair and takes it to them.” “We can’t come to church any more but we think fondly of our time at Hillcrest, and we appreciate you keeping us in your prayers. How nice of you to think of us.”

Folks, we know the hard stories of Hillcrest and our lives, and you know there are also so many good stories and there is good news. Now it is time to find what we are really here for. In a small group last week we looked at the Hillcrest mission statement and realized that is the WHAT that we are all about. It is the good news!

The mission statement reads: Hillcrest Congregational Church is a Christ-centered community of believers. Through worship, service, outreach, fellowship and the arts, we joyfully celebrate and proclaim the good news of the Christian faith. There is a lot there and it can be overwhelming. We are a small church so we need to focus, and we need to sort out what is the core. We cannot afford to get distracted and pulled this way and that like the demonstration with the plumb line.

So let us look closely at the mission statement using a journalism storytelling tool. When we’re telling a story there are some important components. Journalists are told to answer the questions: who what when where why.

The who is: A Christ-centered community of believers. This describes who we are.

The How: Through worship, service, outreach, fellowship and the arts. This is how we do what we do. But it is not the what we are here for. These are just the tools and we do not want to be distracted from the what by focusing on the how.

The what we do is this: joyfully celebrate and proclaim the good news. This is the core, this is the plumb line, this is the focus.

The other questions: the When and where and how much are easy: all the time- here and every where and as much as possible with God's help.

I just love talking to you. I love hearing the hard stories and the good stories. But what we are here for is not to tell each other stories and focus on ourselves. It is the good news. It is time for us to take the good news out to there.

It is time Hillcrest, to return to the plumb line: in our scripture it is "let justice roll down, love the lord... and your neighbor." In our interpretation of scripture here and now for Hillcrest church it is, "celebrate and proclaim the good news."

Let us focus on that, let us keep that in our sights and figure out together how we are going to do it, let us remove any distractions we have from doing that. Celebrate and proclaim the good news. Ah yes, this will be a good story to hear.

## Contemporary Parable

### Plumb line

- I need someone's help to put this plumb line together
- What is it for? And how does it work?
- What happens if I try to move it so it will not hang true to gravity?
- Amos mentions that God had a plumb line. What do you think this means?
- The book of Amos is short- only 9 chapters and all but about 5 verses are doom and gloom prophecy because the people did not follow the plumb line.
- The plumb line in Amos we did not read today "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
- When you think of Jesus' ministry, what is his plumb line? "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."
- Hillcrest is going through a period of self examination and discovery. Do you know what the plumb line is for us? The mission statement: Hillcrest Congregational Church is a Christ-centered community of believers. Through worship, service, outreach, fellowship and the arts, we joyfully celebrate and proclaim the good news of the Christian faith.