

Fences, Gates, and Guardrails
A Sermon on Amos 7:7-17 and Luke 10:25-37 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Three years ago I spent five weeks travelling through Italy. One day I drove my little car over the second-highest road in the Alps, called Stelvio Pass. I drove up to the pass from the north side. There were forty-eight hairpin turns in the road up to the top. At each one of these turns the mountain dropped off precipitously, several hundred feet.

I'm not really good with cliffs and high ladders and getting close to the edge of a roof, so this was really exhausting for me. About half way up to the pass, I pulled off to rest at a shady little parking place. I just let my stomach settle down for about half an hour before driving the rest of the way to the top, which is over 9000 feet above sea level.

I have never been so happy to have guardrails at the edge of the roadway! Eventually I learned to pay no attention to the ten cars lined up behind me and just watch the guardrails and keep the front corner of my car about three feet away from the guardrail. Guardrails keep us safe when we are driving on high mountain roads.

We need guardrails in other parts of life. We need boundaries that help us remember what is really right and what is really wrong. In Holy Scripture, God's people are given guardrails. These guardrails are meant to keep us from making terrible mistakes and straying too far from God's way.

God gives us guardrails through the prophet, Amos. In the text Amos says the Lord showed him a wall, built with a plumb line, which is the simplest tool in the carpenter's tool kit. A carpenter uses a piece of string, called a plumb line, to keep things straight as doors and walls and windows are being built.

This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 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."

God is telling the people, I'm putting up a guardrail in the middle of this nation. The guardrail will be straight, like a plumb line. You must stay in these bounds, or you will be punished. *I will never again pass my people by, pretending they have not violated their covenant with me.*

Our passage continues, *the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.* The people of Israel are violating the covenant they made with God. The people are worshipping all sorts of false gods. God warns them *I will rise against the house of the king, King Jeroboam, with the sword.*

During this time, about 250 years after King David, the nation of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms. The southern kingdom was called Judah. We're more familiar with the southern kingdom of Judah, because it survived as an independent kingdom for a longer period of time. It included the city of Jerusalem, but the land was dry and barren, especially in the most southern regions.

The northern kingdom was called Israel, which is kind of confusing because the entire nation was also called Israel, which was the name God gave to Jacob hundreds of years before Amos' time. The northern kingdom was larger than the south. It received more rain, so the land was fertile.

All of this is important for Amos' story. It's also important to know that King Jeroboam was the king of the northern kingdom, Israel. *Then one of the priests who served King Jeroboam, named Amaziah, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "The prophet Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the power structure of your kingdom. You will not believe the words he has said. For thus Amos has said, 'King Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and the people of Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"*

And the priest Amaziah said to Amos, "You disgusting man. You have no loyalty to the king! Get out of here! If you value your life you will flee to the southern land of Judah, earn your bread there,

and prophesy there; but never again prophesy in this land, for the northern kingdom belongs to King Jeroboam, and his words are the law of the land.

Amos and Amaziah trade harsh words back and forth, but Amos' message remains the same: God is setting a guardrail in the midst of God's people. The king, the priests, and the people, everyone will be held accountable if their behavior crosses the line.

Why is God giving this harsh message to the people of Israel? What is the behavior that is so offensive to God to warrant such terrible punishment?

The king, the priests, and all those in power have forsaken God's covenant through their lack of care for the poor. They treat the poor people of their own nation so harshly, they might as well be slaves. The rich and powerful are systematically taking money and power away from the poor, the disabled, the orphans, and the widows.

The nation ruled by King Jeroboam was wealthy. There was plenty of food. But the poor went hungry, while the tables of the rich were overflowing with more food than they could eat. The poor worked hard but they were at the mercy of the rich. The rich were only concerned with gaining more power.

God was furious with them. The king, the priests, and all those in power have violated their covenant with God, by violating God's commands that they care for those who are most vulnerable. The rich, powerful people have broken their covenant with God by their lack of concern, by their lack of mercy for those who are poor, or sick, or homeless, or hungry. God has set clear guardrails in the midst of the nation. Those who cross those boundaries will be punished by God.

These same guardrails apply to you and me in our lives. People in the United States in 2025 who refuse to care for the poor will be judged by God. Just as it was in Amos' time, those who take from the poor and the powerless, in order to give more money and power to those who are rich, will be punished by God. God has set up a guardrail in the midst of the nation. Each person has been given the power to choose whether to stay on God's path or to break God's covenant.

God's guardrails are critically important, and I think I know which side of God's guardrail you have chosen. The spiritual and literal, physical guardrails of life are essential and helpful. They keep people safe and healthy. They help us build trust and community.

People have a habit of doing something that might seem like building a guardrail, but it's more like a fence. God's guardrails help us build community. The fences people build divide us. The fences built by people are different from the guardrails described by the prophet Amos. Sometimes these fences are literal, physical fences, like the fences being built in Florida to incarcerate people suspected of entering the United States illegally. Sometimes the fences we build are boundaries that are enforced through coercion and threats.

In situations where people build fences to divide and control certain groups or individuals, God creates openings, or gates, that liberate and empower. We see a beautiful example of one of God's gates in our passage from the Gospel of Luke.

In the passage, the well-educated, clever, rich man wanted to justify his actions. So he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan. I think you may have heard this story once or twice before, though it is found only in the Gospel of Luke.

This story has a few predictable elements. When the first listeners heard the story they were not surprised that the man was robbed, beaten, and left for dead while travelling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, because this was a notoriously dangerous road. They were also not surprised that the story is structured around the different responses of three characters. This was a common type of story, often told with three main characters to illustrate a message.

But this story opens up new ways of looking at life for us, just as it opened up new ways of looking at life for the people of Jesus' time. Jesus' audience was not surprised that the first two characters refused to care for the victim. They probably weren't even surprised that the first two

characters were a priest and a Levite. We've all known priests and other religious leaders who were pretty hopeless when it comes to following God's commandments. I'm sure the same thing was true for the people of Jesus' time. The Levites were a special tribe in the nation of Israel. They were the descendants of Levi, the third son of Jacob (the guy with twelve sons who was given the name 'Israel'). The Levites had special religious duties and were expected to act like leaders for the nation.

Jesus' audience most likely wasn't surprised by the failure of the priest and the Levite. But they expected that the third character, the good character, would be a native person, someone whose parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were born in the land of Judah. So these words came as a shock: *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.*

The Samaritans were mixed race people. Most of them were from the North, not from Judah. They claimed to be descendants of Abraham, but they had intermarried with people of other nations. There are many places in scripture where we read about the Jews avoiding having contact with the Samaritans.

Jesus tells a story about a Samaritan being the good character, one who acted with great mercy and generosity. If Jesus was telling his story today, the good character would be someone who is reviled or feared by a large group of people. The good character would be someone who is looked down on, treated as inferior. The good character would be someone who identifies as transgender, or a woman who wears a burkha, or someone who doesn't speak English, or someone who smells strongly of alcohol and cannabis.

The story of the Good Samaritan is a story about the way God opens a gateway in the fences people create to protect themselves from those they fear and despise. The story is partly about our behavior and the way people divide themselves from others. The story is also about the language we use.

Let's notice that at the end of the story, Jesus asks a question: *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?* Being a neighbor is determined, not by our location or our status, but by our behavior.

We cannot treat others as sisters and brothers when we build fences that divide us into rigid groups. Let's also notice that sometimes we build fences that keep ourselves from our full humanity. These are fences of self-denigration. We build fences that denigrate ourselves with phrases such as, "I'm not worth much", "I can't believe I'm so ugly", or "no one likes me". We cannot live fully in the love God intends for us, when we give our attention to our shortcomings and weaknesses.

People build fences. God opens gates of inclusion and empowerment. God invites us to one, big family reunion. God invites us to be members of a single, diverse family of trust and faithfulness: God's family.