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August 17, 2025 Sermon
The First Congregational Church in Old Lyme
Text: Luke 10:25-37

“What Must We Do?”

Our passage today opens with a question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”.

I rephrase this a bit: If I want to thrive...if I want to live a life most deeply aligned with the person God created me to be—What must I do?

I think we can all relate to this question. I think we all have times where we ask ourselves: What should I care most about? How should I act toward others? How should I use my time? How should I respond to the issues I see around me? What work am I called to do?

These are not easy questions to answer and the complications and uncertainties we encounter in trying to answer these questions can discourage us from continuing the search. We therefore need to seek out supports to help sustain us on the search for the path that leads to the fullest possible life. There are many such supports with scripture being one of them.

In our congregation in New London, we follow a set of weekly readings called the common lectionary. When the parable of the Good Samaritan came up a few weeks ago it was paired with an Old Testament reading from the prophet Amos.

In chapter 7 Amos reports:

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.

I found the image of the plumb line so evocative and relevant to tackling the question in our passage from Luke “What must I do.”

You are building a wall. You face lots of choices—where to build it, what materials to use, how high to make it and many other details. But whatever the details of how you decide to build your wall, you want it to be straight, so you hold up a plumb line to guide you. The plumb line automatically hangs perfectly vertical. As you do the work of building the wall you can continually check that it is going up straight by staying parallel to the plumb line. The plumb line works predictably in any place. We don’t need to understand how it always hangs perfectly vertical - we just need to hold it up and use it as a guide as we build.

I’m fascinated with this image because I think that in many ways addressing the question “What must I do” involves finding the equivalent of a plumb line to guide our lives. The vertical we are seeking here is not a straight wall, but a life aligned to the fullness of what God created us to be. Alignment doesn’t specify all the details but establishes a framework for choice.

Could such a spiritual plumb line exist? I hear an affirmation that it does in the passage from Amos. “Then the Lord said See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people.”

I hear a yes from the multiple people who have pointed to an innate capacity for goodness at our core. From the world of science, I think of the books like Dacher Keltner’s *Born to Be Good*. But most profoundly I see reference to an inner plumb line across spiritual traditions. This inner plumb line is

called by different names. The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart called it the divine spark “something in the soul that is so akin to God that it is one with him”. The Apostle Paul called it the mind of Christ. Jesus pointed to it when he said the kingdom of God is within us.

In Buddhism it is called “buddha nature”. Our deepest nature, characterized by loving kindness and compassion. Always present--everything we need *within us*. It may be covered over much of the time but just like clouds can cover the sun, the sun is still shining behind them.

An increasing confidence that we have an inner plumb line that we can choose to ignore but can never totally lose has changed my understanding of the spiritual life. The spiritual task is, I now think, more about uncovering who we most deeply are rather than striving to be something “better”. Less about measuring up to some external standard and more about connecting to our deepest inner wisdom.

So how might we think about our spiritual plumb line as we wrestle to determine “What must I do?”

If gravity sets the vertical for a physical plumb line what sets the vertical for the spiritual plumb line?

I would suggest that the gravity of the spiritual plumb line is love.

I think we see this in our passage. The Samaritan, the text tells us, stops to tend to the wounded stranger because he was moved with compassion. Love, and the compassion that springs from it, is the gravity that set his spiritual plumb line.

The idea that love is the gravity of the spiritual plumb line should not come as a surprise. The greatest commandment that starts with the passage points to this:

"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."

Or in Jesus final teachings to the disciples: 13:34 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Teaching in virtually every spiritual tradition point in this same direction—love as the gravity of the spiritual life.

The broad confirmation of an inner plumb line is encouraging. But the point of a plumb line is to use it as you build. The existence of a plumb line by itself makes little difference—it is using it as the guide of our actions that matters.

Again, we hear this focus on action in our passage today. After the man questioning Jesus correctly quotes scripture Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” Knowing the answer alone is not enough...key is “do this”.

At the end of the parable the man correctly summarizes the meaning when he answers, “the one who showed mercy”. And again, Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

We often, of course, find it hard to go and do likewise. It is all too easy to lose connection with our spiritual plumb line.

Analogy—if you were to use a traditional plumb line near a very strong magnet, the pull of the magnet could be stronger than the pull of gravity and throw the plumb line off. The magnet doesn’t change gravity but it prevents the plumb line from working as it should.

When thinking about our spiritual plumb line, the magnets pulling us off course are many narrow senses of self, fear, insecurity etc.

But however strong these magnets may be, I find great comfort in the fact that at our very core, our spiritual plumb line stays true. The challenge is to recognize and work with the magnets within and around us so that we retain alignment with our inner plumb line.

So, we cycle back to our question: What must I do?

For the Samaritan honing to his plumb line led him to secure basic care for the wounded traveler. Tending to wounds and then bringing the man to a place that can support his full recovery.

Action aligned with the plumb line of love often starts with meeting basic needs.

As a kind of modern-day innkeeper in my work at HHC, I especially take note that the Samaritan does not just do the minimum. As he leaves the wounded traveler at the inn he says to the innkeeper: 'Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

Our work offering emergency shelter would be much, much easier if that spirit prevailed today. The funding we receive from government sources pays a little over half of the costs of the hospitality we offer. I am so moved, however, that year after year, a very generous community has seen the need and stepped in to fill the gap. This congregation has been key. At every turn—from our very beginning till today—the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme has seen the need and responded with incredible generosity. I can honestly say without the support of members of this community our inn would not be open today.

Meeting basic needs where we are able is clearly aligned with the plumb line of love. But I think love calls us to go further than simply caring for wounds, providing access to shelter or addressing the multiple basic needs all around us—although these are important.

I love the work of Fr. Gregory Boyle who runs an organization called Homeboy Industries in CA serving former gang members. Homeboy industries invest in programs that address basic needs - employment, health and much more—but what Fr. Boyle says is that even more important is creating a sense of cherishing and tenderness that heals.

Fr. Boyle points out that this work of healing happens largely through day-to-day human interactions. Interactions characterized by paying attention, continually asking how can I be helpful, always choosing to be well-wishers what he calls “micro affirmers”. Always wanting what God wants --the well-being of others. As Fr. Boyle writes “It is about choosing all over again, with every breath we take to be in the world who God is--compassionate loving kindness.

Fr Boyle applies these insights to what must be very challenging work with former gang members.

We are probably not ready for that, but I think we can all access the same plumb line in all our relationships—with family, friends, community, co-workers and even I would argue the natural world. In every aspect of our lives—small and large—we can work to more fully align our actions with the plumb line centered by the gravity of love. We can respond to the call to “go and do likewise” with large and small actions of cherishing, tenderness, kindness and soothing.

Actions of cherishing, tenderness, kindness and soothing impact any place they are extended. We have all seen this in our families, workplaces, schools, hospitals and so many other locations. I have seen at our shelter how even what seem like small acts—remembering a person’s name, asking how someone is doing, offering practical assistance—can advance the work of healing.

Aligning our actions around this plumb line of love is not easy. But luckily unlike a wall which is fixed once it is built our lives are always a work in progress. We have the continual opportunity to realign and even starting small with those close at hand can be powerful. Where can we let the plumb line of love help us choose tenderness, kindness and soothing? Can we better align with the gravity of love by being a

little more patient, a touch more generous, take a bit more time to acknowledge those around us, learn to breathe deeply and create a space before reacting to things that annoy us.

Not easy but luckily, I think aligning with the plumb line of love—to whatever degree we can at the moment—starts what is called a virtuous cycle-- where each positive outcome reinforces the next, creating a beneficial feedback loop. As Fr. Boyle observes, “the important part about being a soothing presence in the world is that you are soothed, that it's exactly the thing that pulls you out of your own self-absorption that keeps you always reminded that loving is your home.”

So, what must we do? Let the plumb line within us guide our way home.

Amen