

Blogging toward Sunday

By [William H. Willimon](#)

July 9, 2007

God promises the people of Israel that he will not “pass them by.” At the same time, God sets a plumb line against Israel, using a divine standard to measure the fidelity of God’s people. A visit from God, then, is presented as judgment that shall lead to desolation and destruction.

It’s a curious image. God stops, stoops, takes time with Israel in order to judge, in order that there be accountability. Most of the time when I hear the church plead for divine visitation, it’s for the purpose of blessing. “Lord, come save us, give us, bless us” is our prayer. But Amos dares an image of a busy God who, although preoccupied with business elsewhere, finally takes time for Israel.

To be the object of divine attentiveness is not necessarily good news.

Jesus is on his busy way to Jerusalem where he has an appointment with Pilate. On his way a lawyer puts a theological question to him about the inheritance of “eternal life.” Note that the lawyer assumes that eternal life is his birthright—he just wonders which technique will get him his inheritance in the most efficient way. After all, Jesus is a “teacher” of religion, and what is religion “for” if it’s not a technique to get whatever it is we desire? We have tried psychology, 12 steps to recovery, Prozac. What does religion offer earnest seekers-after-eternity like us?

Jesus responds with a story of a victimized man in grave need. A priest and a Levite both pass by on the other side. Then comes a despised, disgusting Samaritan who approaches the victim, assesses and bandages his wounds, puts him on his own animal and takes him to an inn. Read in the context of today’s passage from Amos, this is not only a story of active compassion but also a story of judgment. To those of us among the Chosen who know full well “what is written in the law,” it is highly insulting to have a Samaritan shoved in our faces as an example of someone we

should emulate.

Good, Bible-believing, professional theologians passed by this man. The only one who stopped is a despised Samaritan and when he stopped, when he took time, he became judgment for us. A plumb line is being held up against us. We know what is written, we are credentialed as priests and Levites, and yet our behavior is a scandal to what we profess.

We gather in church to be closer to God. But how do we like proximity to a God who loves enough not to pass by but lingers long enough among us to judge us, to hold a higher standard of judgment against us than that by which we measure ourselves? To a God who is not only loving but righteous, and rarely leaves us unscathed? God is no limp projection of ourselves and our felt needs. God wields a sword against our self-righteous presumption, and against our positive self-image slams a disgusting Samaritan who, while not having our theological commitments, embodies those commitments better than we.

This is probably more than we had in mind for a summer Sunday's chat with the Trinity.