

“Just a Spoon Full of Sugar...”
6 Pentecost / Proper 10B

“Just a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down,” was one of the well known tunes years ago made popular by the Disney film, “Mary Poppins.” Today, many medicines we take orally have sugar in them. Without sugar or some sweetener getting the medicine down where it can do some good might be unconvincing. The sugar industry reports that sugar has a wide variety of physical properties that make it extremely useful in many medicines.

- Sugar coatings are used to protect tablets from chipping
- Sugar has a role in “time-released” medicines
- Sugar is valued in cough syrups
- Sugar binds ingredients together

Sugar, the spiritual additive, is also useful in making us feel good about ourselves and especially when the truth is coated with the substance. We might just slip it in without too much folk taking notice. Sweetening the truth might bind it better with other ingredients we want others to hear.

Eventually to do any good, the bitterness of failing to follow the truth must be understood. Sugar can make the truth inert and less effective.

The prophetic voice of the Lord via Amos was not popular. By today’s standards the message could have used some sugar. Using an ancient measuring tool to determine how straight a structure is to the ground The Lord proclaims to Amos his word:

“See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of the people Israel; I will never pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jereboam with the sword.”

God takes a shepherd and raises him up to proclaim judgment to Israel and its King Jereboam. The Lord is standing by the wall he constructed, representing Israel, and has a plumb line in his hand to see if Israel stands true to its original design.

A plumb line was simply a cord attached to a piece of metal, stone or clay called a plummet to ensure that a wall was vertical or 90 degrees to the ground. The wall was correctly constructed by God but now it was out of line. In ancient days walls would be destroyed and rebuilt.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had both failed to be faithful to worshipping God alone. The high places referred to were essentially Canaanite situated on high places and associated with green trees and leafy oaks. The high places were also known for this reason as sacred groves. Yahweh despised these places for their fertility rites and images of false gods and demanded its leaders destroy them. King Jereboam had reinstated the cult of the Golden Calf in his kingdom's worship center in Bethel.

The plumb line was being used against Israel's crookedness and more so against those responsible for maintaining the upright character by which the nation was constituted by Yahweh. Now after Israel's refusal to change God sends Amos with judgment upon its leaders.

The king's professional prophet, Amaziah, defends his cure and accuses Amos of bad-mouthing the kingdom and the king. He told Amos he should take his prophet practice and go elsewhere. Amos is troubling the king's temple at Bethel, Israel's cultural and religious center. Along with Micah and Hosea, Amos passionately condemns the falsification of weights and measures that had apparently become endemic in eighth-century Israel - "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances" (8:5b). His vision of the plumb line is a visual condemnation of the crooked practices not only of those who dealt viciously in business, but of those responsible for leading, monitoring and regulating the nation's social, political and commercial transactions. The plumb line which Yahweh is setting "in the midst of my people Israel" (v. 8) is a new and corrected leadership, whose forerunner is the prophet himself.

Amos responds that he is a shepherd and a tree surgeon – he is no professional prophet setting his sights on the king's favor. God himself commissioned him and he was not appointed by the king. Amos knew who he was. He did not have to pretend or sugarcoat his words because of who he represented.

It's good to know who you are. There are those who will try to

influence the truth and your convictions as in the case of the chicken lady:

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

“Excuse me,” Gov. Herter said, “do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?”

“Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.”

“But I’m starved,” the governor said.

“Sorry,” the woman said again. “Only one to a customer.”

Gov. Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “I am the governor of this state.”

“Do you know who I am?” the woman said. “I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister.”

Amos was the guy in charge of the chicken. And God gave him orders on how to give it out. He was sure of what the rules were and that God would do what he said he would do. There are people who come along in our lives that have the ability to get right in our faces. And they tell us things in our ears that we don’t like and which we don’t agree. But when they hold out the plumb line folks, hear them well and take a good look at what they are measuring. They just might know what they are talking about. They as did Amos, might just produce some results.

The greatest plumb line given by God to measure both sheep and shepherds is Holy Scripture and the traditions of the church. They are given to guide and lead, to instruct and feed. The Lord Jesus spoke to Peter after his resurrection asking whether he loved

him. Three times he asked and three times he commanded Peter to “feed my sheep.” Feeding the sheep involves action and goes beyond words. When Jesus called the twelve he gave them authority and sent them out with instruction. They were to depend on the welcome of those to whom they were sent. Some doors would be opened to the apostles and others would slam doors in their faces. The message is simple and yet fills the hunger of all who thirst for righteousness. The disciples would be doers of the word and not just hearers.

At the 2006 Prayer Breakfast, President George W. Bush, speaking of rock singer, Bono, said the key is that the singer has been willing to move beyond inspiring words into practical actions to raise money to feed the world’s hungry.

This reminded the president of an old story about a Texas preacher whose sermons kept inspiring a man in the pews to leap up and shout “Use me, Lord, use me.”

Finally, the preacher confronted him and said, “If you’re serious, I’d like for you to paint the pews.”

The next Sunday, the man leaped up during the sermon. But this time, he shouted, “Use me, Lord, use me, but only in an advisory capacity.”

—Reported by Terry Mattingly in his weekly syndicated column on February 8, 2006.

You may have heard that a crucial decision facing this recent 75th General Convention was whether to accept the findings and recommendations of the Windsor Report published in 2004. The report drawn up by members of Anglican provinces from all over the Communion, called for a statement of regret on the decisions of the 74th General Convention on dealing with sexuality. It called for a moratorium on elections and consecrations of non-celibate homosexual persons and on the blessing of same-gender unions. It called for regret from the United States province that “the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached.” **INSTEAD** resolutions passed last month expressed regret for pain others have experienced by what happened in New Hampshire. And instead of a

moratorium what was passed was “very considerable caution” should be used.

Sugar coating theology will not bring us back into communion with other Anglicans around the world. Adding sweeteners to the historic Episcopal Church’s understanding of what it means to be “one holy, catholic and apostolic church” will not make us a whole and universal Church. On page 877 of the Prayer Book, second paragraph, recommendations for such were made long ago at the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and adopted by the House of Bishops in 1886. Sadly the unity called for us to work toward has been severely fractured. Sadly, six dioceses of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States have requested alternative Primatial oversight looking to Canterbury for relief for a broken Church.

Help us Lord to learn the difference between speaking the truth in love, which is our calling, and pouring maple syrup over people as a substitute for what needs to be heard and what truly has to be done. The fields are white with harvest. Soon the corn and pumpkins must be reaped or they will rot. What will your people do? Help us to tear down and rebuild walls that no longer serve your church. Give us strength to put in the work now while the soil is fertile and people are still searching for food for both their souls and bodies. Help us to see you beyond the walls of this building to the plumb line you hold that measures obedience to your Word. Bless us Lord and give us strength and courage to do your will, to seek justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God . AMEN.