

Doing, Loving, and Walking

Sunday, Jan. 16, 2011

Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Micah 6: 6-8

Psalm 23 (Spanish)

Luke 10: 25-37

Over the past two weeks, our nation has been mourning the senseless shootings in Tucson, Arizona which left six people dead and fourteen others injured. And as a nation, we find ourselves searching for an understanding of how and why such a tragedy could happen—AGAIN!

Yet even in the midst of turmoil, the hand of God emerges. Out of the chaos and mayhem, there were people who were **doing, loving, and walking in the WAY of God**. There were those who put their lives on the line to help their brothers and sisters in need, shielding others with their bodies, providing emergency health care, stopping the gunman from taking the lives of even more victims. One can only imagine the grief of the parents of nine-year-old Christina Green who was killed. Yet they donated her organs to save the life of another child who was a total stranger.

On this past Wednesday, at the Memorial Service for those who died, President Barack Obama pointed out our nation's need for healing and reconciliation, especially in the wake of this painful event. He reminded us to nurture our relationships and to treat each other with humility, love, kindness, respect and compassion. In that same address, he noted that "What matters not is wealth, status, power or fame, but how well we have loved and what small part we have played in making the lives of others better."

Our inhumanity to each other is not new. Our scripture reading this morning speaks to a time of the Prophet Micah (around 8th century BCE). Even then, God was calling the people to treat each other with love and respect. The question is facetiously asked: *What does the Lord want from me. Does God want burnt offerings, a thousand rams, or ten thousand measures of oil? Does God want my first born?* God, what do you want!

The answer to the question is simply given: “God has demonstrated what is good. The Lord has already made known what is expected from the Lord’s people. God wants us to **do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God!**”

It was a word that God sent through the prophet Micah that the people did not necessarily want to hear. Being a prophet has its drawbacks, for a prophet is one who is called by God, a visionary, a royal messenger, a teacher of truth. Being a true prophet means taking a stand for truth and justice, often against popular opinion.

In **doing justice**, we faithfully honor God’s established relationship with us. The term “do justice” is not passive. It is dynamic! Through another prophet, Amos, God is saying that *things* do not matter, but “Let justice roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. To “do justice” means to engage in the work of establishing equality for all.

Why was this message necessary in 8th Century BCE? During the time of the Prophet Micah, the powerful were taking the homes and land of the common people. They were fixing the scales so that when the produce was weighed, the poor would be cheated. Some of the judges were crooked and taking bribes. (Yes, this has been happening for a long time.) Other prophets also addressed this abuse. The Prophet Jeremiah warned against those in power neglecting justice for the widows and orphans and not defending the rights of the needy. Amos admonished the people about carelessly trampling the needy and bringing ruin to the poor of the land. Does God have the same word for us yet today?

Justice is associated with love, mercy, redemption, salvation, and righteousness--- all signs of God’s gifts to humanity. This idea of justice and its related themes occur over 600 times in the Bible. What is it about justice that is so important to God? We serve a God who is merciful and just, so God has provided the model for our behavior. Without justice and concern for others, God knows that humanity would destroy itself.

And yet, doing justice is not just about taking care of those who are a part of our biological or church families. We are reminded that we all are members of the same family, the family of God regardless of race or ethnicity.

Our second requirement is that we **love kindness**. This combination of love and kindness is best summed up in the Hebrew word, “hesed,” which implies steadfastness and loyalty.

In the story of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke, we find an example of just that kind of love. A lawyer asks Jesus this question: “What must I do to inherit “eternal life.” Jesus realizes that as a lawyer in Jewish culture, this fellow was not only an expert in civil law, but also in religious law. So naturally, this lawyer already knew the answer. The lawyer replies, “You shall love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus acknowledges this correct answer and says to him, “Do this and you will live.” But the lawyer is not through testing Jesus yet. “And who is my neighbor?” The lawyer was aware that there were boundaries in that culture regarding who would be considered a neighbor and how one should treat others of different religions and cultures. So the lawyer thinks that he has cornered Jesus.

However, Jesus, with his wonderful gift of teaching, does not give the answer directly, but leads the lawyer to come to a conclusion himself. He tells the story of a man, who was accosted by robbers and severely wounded. A priest and a Levite, both holy men, passed by this wounded man without helping. Yet the Samaritan, one who is considered to be of low status, is able to transcend those boundaries and show kindness to an outsider. He is the one who shows mercy, a prime of example of what it means to be a good neighbor.

The Samaritan did what Jesus does for all of us on a daily basis when we are wounded. **Jesus takes pity on us, bandages our wounds, and takes us to a place where we can be healed.** The priest and Levite may not have thought that they were lacking in their love for God and may have engaged in worship daily. They knew the letter of the law but were lacking in the spirit of the law, that of loving kindness and having compassion.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh observes that “If you are motivated by loving kindness and compassion, there are many way to bring happiness to others right now, starting with kind speech. Through our communication with others... “We can show care for those who are hurting and who need help.” Perhaps we can learn to practice mindful speaking, even in political discourse. (Do you think?)

And Thirdly: The Lord requires that we **walk humbly WITH God**. Living the Christian life is not one of arrogance but of one of humility. Walking with God does not exempt us from the hardships of life. But we have the assurance that we do not walk alone. In the 23rd Psalm, we have the guarantee that *even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for God is with us.*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose life we will celebrate on tomorrow, lived with the realization that he walked through the valley of the shadow of death throughout his ministry. And even with this awareness, he kept on walking because he believed in God's mercy and grace.

We may recall Dr. King's sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, just two months before his assassination when he spoke of his death (which we now realize was imminent). Dr. King said that at his funeral, he did not want it mentioned that he had won a Nobel Peace prize and over 300 other awards. What he did want said was that he tried to live his life serving others, that he tried to love somebody, tried to feed the hungry, clothe those who were naked, visit those in prison and serve humanity. He wanted it said that he was a "Drum major for justice." *Dr. King's dedication to non-violence and justice is still being modeled in social and political movements all over the world.*

During my freshman year at South Carolina State University, at age 17, I was jailed on three occasions as I participated in the non-violent marches in Orangeburg. As students, we were attempting to integrate the bowling alley there and were charged with parading without a permit. I can still remember the powerful spray of the water hoses, the yelping of the attack dogs, and the angry inflammatory remarks from the bystanders. And as we marched, we all realized that the possibility of death was ever present, especially when we were incarcerated and could be taken out of the jail in the middle of the night.

When Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, I was a part of the civil rights movement in Beaufort, South Carolina. I was often followed by men in pick-up trucks with gun racks attached. My principal at the school where I worked was concerned for my safety and he was also getting pressure from city officials who wanted him to "control" his teacher. He cautioned me to not be on the front line but to just work behind the scenes. However, the stakes were too high. So many people of all races and ethnicities had paid a

high price in tearing down the walls of injustice. So fear could not be a deterrent to doing what was right. And for those of us who remember the struggle, Dr. King's message of forgiveness and reconciliation becomes ever more important today.

This passage from the 6th chapter of Micah was one Dr. King's favorites. And it is easy to see why! Dr. King was a man, who **did** justice, who **loved** kindness, and who **walked** with humility, even though it meant that he was a target for those who desired to do just the opposite: to circumvent justice, to hate kindness and to practice arrogance. Dr. King also reminded us that "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires [the] passionate concern of dedicated individuals. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is the time for vigorous and positive action."

As our Creative God made us to be different from each other, so we celebrate and respect our differences. But let us also celebrate the common thread that unites us: *We are all children of God. We are each other's neighbors*

God has given us a step-by-step plan for Christian living. Even today, God is saying to us, Sisters and Brothers, Neighbors:

Let us do justice and practice fairness, civility, respect and mercy in our interactions. Let us love kindness and care for the orphan and the widow; provide for the stranger and the homeless; visit those who are sick and in prison. Let us walk humbly, realizing that there is something to learn from each person with whom we have an encounter, even children.

... For it is by living the life that God requires of us that we worship and glorify a mighty God. By doing what God requires of us, we give God the highest praise!

Thanks be to God. Amen.