

“WALKING HUMBLY”
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12
January 29, 2023
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A couple of weeks ago, I was exploring biblical texts that we might use in the coming weeks. When we don't have a theme or topic that we want to pursue, we often look to the lectionary for inspiration. The lectionary is a series of texts assigned by a committee for specific Sundays on a three year cycle. Lots of pastors are what we call “lectionary preachers,” which is why friends who belong to different churches often discover that their pastors preached from the same biblical passage. We seldom do this anymore, but I was attracted to these two that were assigned for today; first, because these strike me as cornerstone texts for our congregation, our “canon within a canon,” and second, because these scriptures fit hand in glove together. You couldn't do much better to understand what “walking humbly before God” means than turning to the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

I was very excited to explore these connections when Janet reminded me last week that the sermon today needs to be celebratory. At first, because I am sometimes slow to catch on, I wondered why. Then, I remembered that today is the annual meeting. Having instructed today's presenters to bring a celebratory note to their reports, a sermon on humility could easily strike a dissonant chord for the day.

On the one hand, I want to say that I am very proud of this congregation's accomplishments over the past year. On the other, Micah clearly states that it doesn't matter how dynamic Israel's worship may be, God needs something else, a commitment to justice, kindness, and humility. At first glance, it would seem that the theme for the sermon this morning is working at cross purposes with the theme for the day.

In my work for the Presbytery these last several years, I often got to talk with leaders from other congregations. As you can imagine, many churches have struggled through the pandemic. The chief challenge has been how to stay connected without being physically present. Some churches recorded the various parts of the service, edited them together and posted it on facebook or youtube. Others livestreamed the service using various technologies from installing new equipment and software to the pastor's cellphone.

I was talking with a session recently whose church hadn't managed the technology well. They were using an iPad to livestream their service. They were beginning to take steps to develop a better system. I tried to encourage them to make this a priority. I told them about our own experience: how our people worked hard to create a quality livestream, how well our folks took to it, how some peoples “attendance” became more regular, how our snowbirds felt included when they were away, how new people found us through the livestream. Well, I think they understood the benefits. They knew they'd have to spend the money to upgrade the technology. What they didn't know was how they were going to find someone to run it.

Well, that shut me up pretty quick. I had to ponder whether I was proud of our accomplishment or just being boastful about it. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was more going on here than the hard work of individuals to make it happen, and more going on than the receptiveness of the congregation. I remain proud of the accomplishment and especially the people that have made it happen, but I needed to acknowledge the role played by privilege.

Not every congregation has a person with the expertise to develop and install livestreaming. It requires a certain level of education and experience. Humility requires that we acknowledge that we didn't get here on our own. Lots of people work hard, but lack the opportunities for success that some have without expending the same amount of effort. We have more resources in this congregation than most churches in our presbytery. That's the result of hard work and wise decisions, but it's also the result of privilege.

This is not to suggest that privilege is a bad thing, something to feel guilty about. When we use the term white privilege, we acknowledge that certain advantages have come to us because of the color of our skin. We often hear it as an accusation, but it simply recognizes a reality. Certainly "privilege" describes an inequity, but one that should engender a spirit of responsibility, not one that induces inescapable guilt.

Israel had privileges. God looked out for them, redeemed them from slavery, sent them Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, constantly intervened on their behalf when times got hard. They used their privilege to do evil instead of good. Their advantages didn't make them behave this way. It didn't insulate them from temptation. In fact they drifted so far from listening to God, according to Micah, that not even "inspiring worship" could save them.

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" We need to remember that this keystone verse is set in the context of a privileged people who had gone astray even while maintaining dynamic worship. Even the best livestream service in Michigan amounts to little if our privileges don't lead to responsible connection to others through relationships of justice, kindness, and humility.

Here is where the connection to the beatitudes enters the picture for me. One of the most common temptations we face is to confuse "privilege" with "blessing." "Count your many blessings. Count them one by one" goes the old hymn. A lot of people start the list with family and go on to add, shelter, food, a good job.... We think of blessings as things we have... some of the things we have, we worked hard for, some come as gifts, family we're born or adopted into... some of the things we have, others do not. Inequities are caught up in the middle of our list of blessings. This doesn't make them bad, just complicated.

And so Jesus turns blessing on its head. He asks us to think about it differently. It's not those with a joy to share who are blessed, but the one who mourns. It's not those who are rich who are blessed, but the poor in spirit. It's not the strong who are blessed, but the meek; not those whose table is full, but those who hunger and thirst; not those who conquer, but those who make peace; not the celebrated, but the persecuted, not those wise in the ways of the world, but the pure in heart.

The beatitudes point me back to the “walk humbly before God” of Micah. They make me think about celebration and blessing differently. It has been a great pleasure to see the way in which the talents, and commitments of individuals have come together to transform and enrich our worship experience. I hope that everyone who has made a contribution feels appreciated, but walking humbly means we celebrate the relationships maintained and developed, the new faces we see, the community we have become. Walking humbly means we celebrate being welcomed into a community who offers comfort in the midst of our losses, a community whose gentleness includes care for the earth, a community who values mercy over judgment, a community endeavoring to see the face of God in the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.

It's been a great pleasure to see a significant group of people exploring racial inequity in our society, willing to acknowledge the church's complicity in maintaining the structures supporting the ongoing racism. I have to confess that I've mentioned this to other pastors and I have to wonder whether there isn't a little boasting going on here. Nothing could be further from the spirit of the group who focus more on what there is yet to learn, not what little has been learned. What's important is not the knowledge, but the hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the desire to build better relationships.

You are healthier now than any other time I can remember. We could say that that stems from our commitment to inspiring worship, to our ability to adapt to the challenges of the day, to our strong sense that faith must engage the world, or to the dedication of our hard-working deacons. These are all things to celebrate. But they come with a temptation, the temptation to think that we have become the church we want to be, that we have finished the journey, that there is nothing more to do but “cross the t's and dot the i's.” We have resources, skills, talents and money, but if we lose that poverty of spirit that recognizes the grace of God in all things, we walk this journey in vain. If we're too busy celebrating our successes, that we stop seeing the inescapable pain that comes with living, we will miss out on the blessing of belonging to a community that knows about comfort. If we become satisfied with the sort of “blessing” that amounts to a list of “happy things,” privileges, we will miss out on the hungering and thirsting. We will miss out on the grieving. We will miss out on the poverty. We will miss out on being in the places that God chooses to be. Walking humbly is the best way I know to take the blinders off our privilege.

So it's been a good year. We've improved our technology. We've grown as a congregation. Worship attendance has been steady, even begun to grow a little. We've paid all our bills with money to take into 2023. We know a little more about the Bible, a little more about racism, poverty, and hunger. There is so much to be thankful for, but if I'm celebrating anything, it's the way this community has supported others in their losses, it's the thirsting after a more intimate connection to God and to one another, it's the acknowledgement and reliance on God's grace. Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly. This is what God requires. This is what I'm celebrating about you and about our faith journey this past year. Thanks be to God. Amen.