

WHAT DOES GOD WANT OF US? Rev. Judy Hjorth, January 30, 2011

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

In our Judeo-Christian Scriptures, there are many answers to the question, “What does God want of us”. In Micah’s time, the offerings of calves, olive oil and first-born child were all thought to please God. But Micah sarcastically and with exaggeration makes fun of these offerings. All that God wants of us says Micah is “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly” with our God. This phrase is so easy to say—it has a poetic rhythm and rolls off the tongue, but it is so hard to live in our families, our communities and the world.

To go more deeply we need to examine what it meant to Micah to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. In the UCC study of the scripture readings on the UCC website, Susan Blain wrote that to do justice meant to be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world, to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others. Currently, we are watching people clamoring for redistribution of power and wealth in Tunisia and Egypt. Our country is very ambivalent towards wealth and power. No matter who is President, the rich continue to get richer, the middle class continues to shrink and the number of poor increases. Franklin D. Roosevelt believed in the redistribution of wealth, I don’t think a President since has dared to support that position. And we all saw what happened to the initiative to tax the wealthy in this state. It takes as much courage to talk openly about the redistribution of power and working for an equitable distribution of resources in our society as it did for the prophets in their day. For most of his ministry Oscar Romero supported the status quo in El Salvador. However, after serving as bishop of Santiago de Maria where he witnessed first-hand the suffering of El Salvador’s landless poor and the assassination of his good friend Jesuit Father Rutilio Grande for supporting the poor, Oscar Romero decided he too must take that path. By then he had been made the Archbishop in San Salvador. He spoke of his conversion from the rich to the poor and became known as the ‘Voice of the Voiceless’. On March 24, 1980, a group of unidentified gunmen entered a small chapel in San Salvador and shot him to death while he was blessing the bread and the wine for mass. This understanding of justice adds “meat to the bone” of what it to do justice.

Brueggeman and others say that the word “kindness” as a translation for the word Hebrew word “*hesed*” is disastrously weak. The word *hesed* means to reorder life into a community of enduring relationships, a loyal loving covenant community. Too often people think that if there is a church fight, then it is not a loving community. I am greatly indebted to the work of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. They have trained hundreds of people in conflict mediation skills. They do distinguish between good and bad fights and teach the biblical foundations for finding renewal in conflict. Is Songaia where Nancy Lanphear lives a *hesed* community? Is Kirkland Congregational Church a *hesed* community? The kind of community in which people are loyal and support one another through good times and bad over time.

To walk humbly with God means to acknowledge in daily attitude and actions that life is indeed derived from the reality of God. A former nun told me the following story which describes the opposite of humble: “A priest called a man an S.O.B.—no reflection on his sainted Mother, he added, he thinks he is a self-made man.” Our society honors self-made men and women. Society tends to think that to be humble is the same as being self-demeaning. But think of Pope John the 23, he was known as a humble man and yet he knew what he wanted and got it. There is a story told that when he declared his intention of paying a Christmas visit to a prison in Rome, one of his aides protested that there was simply no protocol for such a thing, and the Pope replied, “Well then, make some!” Also think of the excellent TV reality series, “Undercover Boss” where real CEO’s go undercover in their own companies to see how everything is going. The head of Waste Management learned how to clean out the portable John’s, the head of Norwegian cruise lines waited tables. The head of CIS learned to pack boxes. They opened themselves to failure in their own company. At least two of them could not keep up with the workers and were told they were not needed. Later, the CEO’s showed the video’s to all the workers. That takes a certain amount of humbleness. It clearly demonstrated that the CEO’s valued the workers as essential to the company.

And what does God require of the community but to do justice, and to love hese, and to walk humbly with our God.

Our Gospel reading, the Beatitudes, has many interpretations. Here again, Jesus is speaking to the community. Too often the Beatitudes are overly personalized, sentimentalized and spiritualized. Matthew contributes to this tendency by having the first Beatitude be “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke’s version reads simply. “Blessed are the poor.” Psychologically to be “poor in spirit” is healthy if it means that one is striving to know oneself. The more we know ourselves, the more clearly we can see our world. We meet God both in ourselves and in the world.

However, most of the time in Scripture, the word ‘poor’ refers to material rather than spiritual poverty. Jim Wallis, the evangelical Christian writer, who progressive Christians like to quote, wrote that during his first year in seminary he and a group of kindred spirits went through the Bible looking for every reference to poor people, to wealth and poverty, to injustice and oppression, and to what the response to all these issues was to be for the people of God. He wrote, “We found *several thousand* verses in the Bible on the poor and God’s response to injustice. We found it to be the second most prominent theme in the Hebrew Scripture Old Testament—the first was idolatry and the two were often related.” The group found that in the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke one in every ten verses is about the poor or the subject of money. Therefore, they were surprised that not one of them could remember a sermon on the poor in their home churches. I was happy to remember several sermons on related topics since I have been back; we have had sermons on the homeless and the need for affordable housing, on stewardship of the earth and on bullying of teenage gays and the resulting high rate of suicide. There may have been others, but these were the first to come to mind. The list of Mission & Ministry Opportunities in each Sunday’s bulletin also keeps the poor and poverty in our consciousness.

To return to the group of seminarians who were doing the research; a particularly zealous one took scissors and an old Bible and literally cut out every verse with any sort of reference to the poor. When he was done, the Bible was so full holes, it almost fell apart. Jim Wallis would take it with him when he preached, hold it up in the air and say, Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes.

The Beatitudes clearly had to be cut out as it threatened to turn the world as we know it upside down by saying in the kingdom of God, the blessed ones are the poor, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the earth keepers, the persecuted and the ones who are hungry and thirsty for justice.

You may wonder at why the mourners are included in that list. Generally, we think of mourners as those who weep for a lost loved one. While Jesus did weep when told that his friend Lazarus was dead, he also wept over Jerusalem because the people did not remember the things that made for peace. I think those who mourn over budget and tax priorities that literally continue to make the rich richer, shrink the middle class and make the poor even poorer, those who mourn over the wars or melting glaciers or teen prostitutes and the list of mourners can go on and on do fit on the list.

You may have caught that I took the liberty of adding earth keepers to the list because I think Jesus is speaking through all the people who are working to protect creation today. At the time Jesus walked this earth, there wasn't much people could do to hurt the environment so it was not an issue as it is today.

Sometimes the Beatitudes are taught as if we should each try and have every one of these qualities. Instead, I think we need to support and celebrate the people who have these qualities in our world. Furthermore, we need to ask ourselves what are the gifts of this particular community called Kirkland Congregational Church UCC. Elizabeth O'Connor, one of my favorite authors, wrote "we ask what is God's will for our lives?" The will of God is written inside us in our gifts. We will be held accountable for using our gifts to meet the world's needs. Here are some of the gifts of our church as I see them.

Hospitality is certainly our strongest gift. Being hospitable is part of our identity. Though there is always more than one reason, wanting to be hospitable influenced the decision to host the Twelve-step groups and other denominations. It influenced the decision to become an 'Open and Affirming' congregation. It influenced the renewed commitment to refreshments after worship and having greeters. It influenced the decision to host Tent City Four for the third time. Wanting our building to be inviting and not looking old and tired influenced the various refurbishing projects over the years—most recently the new carpet and ongoing paint jobs. Now Jason is challenging us to make our building more accessible for our members and for the 12-step groups.

Do we see hospitality, Earth Keepers, Mission Projects, Sibling House, Christian Education, and Progressive Christianity as gifts to meet the world's needs? Will we advocate

for the 2011 Clean Water Act? Will we make this church truly accessible? Will we support public schools? Will we work for affordable housing?

Jason has started us thinking about our vision for the future. What are our gifts? Where is our heart and what are our resources?

May we walk humbly with our God as we realistically discern our gifts, our resources and search our hearts for where we want to go. May our church be blessed because we use our gifts to make the world a more hospitable place.