

“Praying Our Way to San Jose”
June 19, 2008
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Micah 6:1-8
1 Timothy 2:1-3
Matthew 7:21-29

“THEME FOR A PROPHETIC CHURCH”

As a perpetual member of the Sparks area high school baccalaureate committee, I recently went through the annual process of helping to pick a theme for the celebration that claims graduation from high school as an event of spiritual significance. As usual, the themes were suggested without any particular spiritual reflection; it always seems to be a matter of selecting something that sounds good, is slightly *aspirational* if not genuinely *inspirational*, and then I always somehow get assigned the task of finding some scripture passage that supports the theme that has been chosen. As in *past* years, I objected again *this* year that the process is *backwards*; the *theme* should emerge from reflection on the *scriptures*, not the other way around. But once again, I found myself searching a concordance, trying to think of key words that would point me to a few verses from the Bible to give some religious legitimacy to what the committee had already decided the preacher for the occasion should say.

Happily, the theme for the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) always comes from scripture itself. The challenge in our case is not to allow denominational headlines to force a meaning upon *scripture*, but rather to allow *scripture* to inform and shape the meeting of the General Assembly, and *beyond* the meeting, to shape the program of the church and, derivatively but most importantly, to shape the lives of Presbyterians. Few passages of scripture could be so admirably suited to that last task in *any* season as Micah chapter 6, verse 8: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” The passage from First Timothy chosen as the second reading for this series of worship services on the way to San Jose suggests a specific example of how Paul, or somebody writing in his name, thought that should be *done*—prayer of every sort, and for every sort of person. To these two readings I have taken the liberty of adding a third, from the gospels, believing that every occasion of worship is a proper occasion for hearing the words and remembering the deeds of our Lord (extending the injunction of W-2.2002). The passage that appeared in the lectionary a few Sundays

ago is, I think, an important commentary on the apostolic encouragement to prayer, and an explanation of the prophet's critique of Israel's worship life.

The prophets are not well enough known in many of our churches. Despite the insistence of our confessions that the *Old* Testament is every bit as much the concern of Christians as the *New* Testament, some Presbyterians, regrettably, hear from the prophets only around Christmas or when we find some of their verses to be useful in backing up our condemnation of this or that sin. And if that's the only exposure people *have* to the prophets, or the only exposure our people are *given* to the prophets by their ministers, the prophetic message and the prophetic task will be misunderstood in our churches. The prophets must have a meaning for us beyond providing ammunition against those with whom we disagree or proof-texting theological claims that the prophets could not possibly have thought of making. The integrity of the Bible demands that we hear from the books that make up more than a quarter of the Old Testament, and that we hear aright a word that stubbornly insists that the spiritual health of a people is tied directly to the social health of their nation, that the condition of the soul cannot be separated from the treatment of the body, that the well-being of the individual cannot be disconnected from the well-being of the community. And *that* means that the church cannot ignore or isolate itself from the hurts and fears and hunger and hardship of the neediest. The prophets declared that the God who *created* the world and everything that lives in it is supremely *concerned* for the world and everything that lives in it. And nothing in the New Testament contradicts that truth, but only makes it the more emphatic.

Micah emerged from the Judean countryside to lay before people who considered themselves to be God's own the ways in which they were oppressing each other. The rich were oppressing the poor, the rulers were oppressing their subjects, judges were oppressing defendants, employers were oppressing workers, merchants were oppressing their customers. Micah was distressed by the power of urban centers like Jerusalem and Samaria that prospered at the expense of country folk and even the landscape itself. He was disturbed by widows being turned out of their houses and laborers being denied their sabbath rest and debtors being forced into perpetual poverty. He was grieved by religious leaders who were more interested in pleasing their patrons than in honoring God, and who thereby presided over ceremonies and festivals that were hypocritical at best. His rants are sometimes pointed to as evidence against worship that is liturgical or ceremonies that are ritualistic. But

Micah's complaints were not against *liturgy* and *ritual* in the worship place, but against the behavior of the people *outside* the sanctuary that made *any* worship by them unpleasing to God. If they could not get along with each other, if they dealt dishonestly with each other, if they slandered each other, if they tried to gain advantage over each other, and if they claimed divine sanction for the injuries that they were inflicting on each other, then their worship was untrue and their prayers were inauthentic. They were just spouting so many words, a lot of "Lord, Lord's", even as they wondered why their society was not morally strong enough to ward off the Assyrians and Babylonians at the gates. Burnt offerings could not make up for cold hearts. Thousands of rams could not atone for thousands of hungry and homeless. Ten thousands of rivers of oil were no substitute for justice rolling down like waters. An offering of one's firstborn could not answer for the sin of creating a generation of orphans by gratuitous warfare that betrayed the nation's ultimate trust in soldiers and weapons.

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Nations and *leaders* of nations have a hard time doing that. Political rivals would accuse any governor or king or prime minister or president who practiced or advocated living by such a rule as "weak" and "cowardly". Churches, too, have a hard time doing what Micah prescribed, especially when they become enmeshed in the cultural web of consumerism and individualism and nationalism and politicization of questions that are, at root, moral. And if the *church* can't learn or gives up on doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with its God, what hope is there that society at *large* will ever *try* it? In the prevailing political and social climate, we could easily be *twice* our current membership if we were less concerned with being faithful to the God who is honored by justice and kindness and humility—if we would simply bless the prevailing culture rather than offering an alternative to it.

An interesting thought occurred to me as I reflected on the honor of having been invited to preach at this way-station along the pilgrimage to San Jose for the renewing of our covenant, as Presbyterians, with each other and with God. At age 57, I have been a Presbyterian for more than a quarter of the history of our denomination. Does that mean that *I* and that *old*, or that our *church* is that *young*? Here in the year of our Lord 2008, we are easily within three lifespans of John Witherspoon gaveling

to order that first meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. I don't know what was *prayed for* that day, but I *do* know what John Witherspoon *preached* about: the text for the sermon was 1 Corinthians 3:7, reading, in the Authorized Version, as yet uncorrected for its gender-specific pronouns, "So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase." The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was born with a summons to spiritual humility ringing in its ears. Two hundred nineteen years later, we *still* need to be spiritually humble, and to do justice, and to love kindness. And we don't seem always to be *doing* it—in our *congregations*, where we are anxious that *other* churches, less theologically rigorous, are growing faster than *we* are, and in our *denominational* life, where factions bent on winning a point seem no longer to believe that we are each God's gift to one another. But we *are* God's gift to one another. And so we must not approach the meeting in San Jose as if we were riding into battle against our opponents who are so obviously deaf to the whisperings or shoutings of the Holy Spirit, eager to defend God against libertinism, on the one hand, or Pharisaism, on the other. Arrogance, pride, triumphalism, vindictiveness, privilege, advantage—those are the ways of the world which, if we engage in *any* of them, will cause our worship tonight to be rejected by God, which will cause Christ to deny even knowing us, but to be identified by him instead as evildoers even while we claim to be doing his will.

The Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church accomplished something, or rather *discovered* something, truly amazing a couple of years ago: that when you worship with other people, even those with whom you disagree, when you break bread and drink the cup with other people at the table of reconciliation, even those with whom you disagree, the Lord blesses your efforts. Our church is now embroiled in debate about the recommendations of that task force. I happen to be one of those people who applauded their conclusions. But I am also one of those people who thought that the *conclusions* were not nearly as important as the *process*—that regardless of the particular measures that the Task Force unanimously recommended, the Task Force had done Presbyterians and the whole of Christ's Church a tremendous benefit by *praying* with one another, *worshiping* with one another, *listening* to one another, and *honoring* one another. That, I believe, was supremely Christ-like. From what I read in the Bible, God is at least as interested in the way we treat each other in the process of *making* decisions as in the decisions *themselves*.

When no one is beyond the scope of our prayers—prayers not that God will defeat them or persuade them to our way of thinking but that God will bless them and give them peace and preserve their dignity as we are all brought to a better understanding of God’s will—then we are walking humbly with our God. When kindness is our method and justice is our passion, then our worship of the God who remembers our frailties and deals with us mercifully, who redeems slaves from oppression and gives them a place in which to grow and prosper, becomes genuine and acceptable to the one to whom all honor is due. Nobody in the scriptures is beyond the possibility of salvation. Therefore, nobody in God’s world is beyond the bounds of our concern—a concern which, if we are humbly walking with God, is not a program first to convert or correct, but a compulsion to love and to care for, an insistence that she or he be treated with dignity and justice and kindness, a compassion that makes us advocates for that person before one another and before God. Whenever we forget that truth, whenever we assume an entitlement or presume a privilege, we have turned from the ways of humility, and risk not walking with God at all.

Will our Church be one that models the doing of justice and the loving of kindness and walking humbly with God? We cannot prescribe it for others if we do not practice it ourselves. Will we remember that *others must not be coerced* and that *God cannot be compelled*? Our task is to plant seeds and to water, and not to draw attention to ourselves in the doing, but to credit God with the growth and praise God for the bounty. Our righteousness is not capable of being measured in the number of times we sprinkle our conversation with godly talk, but only by the sincerity with which we apply ourselves to lifting up the poor and the powerless, and defending the abused and the outcast, and bending down to heal the wounded and mend the broken. Our salvation is most manifest when we are humble enough that we lose ourselves in the doing. So the theme of the General Assembly at this point in our denominational life *should* be, and the theme of every person who has faith in the God testified to by the prophets *must* be, “Do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” And it all begins with prayer that excludes none and encompasses all.