

Lydia Neufeld Harder, 2 February, 2014

“Back to the Basics: Who is our God?”

Micah 6: 1-8; Matt; 5: 1-13.

What do I preach about on the day of the congregation’s AGM or annual meeting ? I spent some time reflecting on that question, but did not come up with a theme that seemed suitable. And so I went to the suggested lectionary texts ! Would there be anything relevant in these ancient texts assigned for reading on this day? And they quickly gave me an answer.

Preach about the basics! Talk about what we are all about as a fellowship gathered to worship every Sunday. I soon realized that the texts for today are particularly suited to help us reflect on our basic identity and purpose as we meet for our annual meeting. These texts hold us accountable for who we are as a fellowship meeting regularly to worship. But they also point out how privileged we are that we have tasted something of what the kingdom of God is all about.

As I read the first text from Micah more carefully, I could not help but see some similarities between that text and our “business” meetings as a church. Though the texts in Micah are set up as a court case, and hopefully ours are not, our business meetings are an exercise in holding each other accountable for our actions in the past year. We ask our treasurer to open the financial books to us to see if the money that we have contributed is well spent. We reflect on committee reports to see if the direction that they have set is one we can endorse. We review the highlights of the year, reflecting on how they fit into the overall purpose of our fellowship. The AGM thus focusses on the practical aspect of our faith as a fellowship and asks some basic questions about how we are living this out in our larger community interactions.

However, for me the text in Micah has a much more uncomfortable tone than our AGM meetings generally have. In this text the community of God’s people are held accountable through a court process where there are witnesses, claims and counter claims and finally a verdict. Micah, the prophet uses the literary style of a courtroom litigation scene to draw attention to God’s review and evaluation of our past actions. And that puts a new twist on our annual meetings. Even though we begin the meetings with prayer invoking God’s presence, we are not often fully aware that God is present reviewing and evaluating the year with us.

So let us begin with the text from Micah and see what it has to say to us today.

We begin with scene 1, the summons to the trial.

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord and you enduring foundations of the earth: For the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

God initiates this trial because he feels he has a serious case against the people. The summons is directed to those who name themselves “God’s people”; in that day it would have been the people of Israel. The mountains and the hills, who have stood at attention for a long time, observing and overhearing the goings on between God and his people, are summoned to assist in the day’s proceedings. They can offer reliable witness from time immemorial about the covenant that creates the bond between the Creator God and the people.

Scene 2 begins with the trial itself. Both parties are assembled in the courtroom. Each contestant, first God the plaintiff and then Israel, the defendant makes their respective claims. God’s speech consists of a compelling rehearsal of amazing grace as evidenced in four gifts that God has given his people. These gifts highlight important events in the history of Israel.

First of all there is the deliverance of the people from the bondage in Egypt, secondly there are the leaders, Moses, Aaron and Miriam chosen by God, thirdly there is the safety from the surrounding tribes that continually threatened the Israelites in the wilderness and finally there is the entrance into the promised land. God is making the case that the people have been richly blessed by God as God has promised in the covenant God made with the people from the time of Abraham until now. But God also sees that the people have forgotten the blessings and are not responding to them as God had hoped.

The background to this case may be helpful here. Micah, the prophet, is speaking toward the end of a very prosperous era for the people of Judah and Israel-- Forty years of economic growth and well-being for God’s people who are now safely settled in the land and who have been busy building up their cities and creating vast fortunes for their kings and large armies for their protection. Forgotten are the challenges that their parents faced when they crossed the desert and entered the land of Canaan, when they were faced with other tribes also vying for the same land, when the daily lives of people were characterized by worry about daily food and water, about shelter for the night and safety on the journey. Instead the people of Israel and Judah are busy accumulating wealth and securing their future with their vast land holdings and abundant harvests. Though the people continue to

observe certain rituals of their tradition, they are no longer following in the ways of the God who has led them into the land.

God sees that the people have forgotten their story, their identity and so God cries out in anguish.

Oh my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I wearied you? Answer me!

The plaintiff cries out not only in accusations but in deep love, crying out as a parent disappointed with children who are rejecting the love so freely given.

The people answer. They defend themselves vigorously. They suggest that they show their love through their worship rituals and ceremonies. They present their response in four questions, each of them requiring a bit more from the worshipper. Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, or year old calves or thousands of rams or torrents of oil or even to the sacrifice of a first born? Will that be enough to appease an angry God?

The people do not see the love of God but rather see a god like other gods who needs to be appeased, who needs to see the people humbled, who demands sacrifices for their own sake, who treats the people as slaves rather than as children. Their worship rituals may be colorful but are full of pretence because they have lost sight of the kind of God they worship.

And so we come to the final scene. The verdict is given.

First of all, there is a reminder to the people that there is no excuse for ignorance of what the Lord really requires of them.

“He has told You, oh mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you”

In other words, there is no excuse for ignorance here. You have been given the knowledge and revelation in your history, so you know what is good. It is not just worship rituals that God requires.

Rather it is to *“do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”*

In rabbinic circles in the Jewish community these three lines are considered the summary of all the commandments that God gave his people. God’s recipe for doing “good” is to treat each other as God has treated them.

First of all, “do justice”. As God delivered the Israelites out of slavery so you too are to deliver those who are oppressed, who are longing for freedom, who live under situations that are unjust. It means being attentive to the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged. Secondly, as God has been merciful to you, so you are to be merciful to others. Justice and mercy go together in God’s way. You are to love kindly or mercifully. That is, love the way God loves: steadfast, loyal love, committed compassion, devoted kindness—in summary a kind of covenant love that continues when life is tough.

Finally, “to walk humbly with your God.” The translation here is difficult but means something like ordering your whole life in an unassuming, reverent way, always ready to ask whether this is God’s way or only your own desire and opinion. It means to remember with whom you are walking and to act accordingly.

The book of Micah as a whole spells out ways in which the people of Israel have lost their basic identity as God’s people. They have not lived out their purpose: that all peoples should be blessed through them. They have forgotten why God called them out of slavery, why God led them in the wilderness, why God gave them leaders and brought them into the promised land. Therefore, the people have not lived out the blessing that they have received , in the way they have related to others. They have not responded to God’s blessing and love by loving others in the way God has loved them: unwaveringly, steadfastly, enduringly. No rituals, no sacrifices will take the place of doing the good that they know how to do.

The prophet Micah ends his book with a note of hope. After picturing a time when all the nations, not only Israel will stand accused before God, dreading the verdict that God will give, he ends his writing with praise for the kind of God we worship.

*Who is a God like you,
Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression. . .
God does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us ; he will tread our iniquities under foot.*

You (our God) will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness . . . as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

These texts from Micah also hold us accountable as a worshipping congregation. They ask us to name the good that our God has revealed to us and to live with each other according to that good. They invite us to again affirm that it is the Creator God we worship, that it is Jesus who showed us the way and that it is the Spirit who leads us as we honour the baptismal covenants that we have made. They

challenge us to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God” as we move into the new church year. And they suggest, that as we work at the practical aspects of our community life, we not forget the God who has called us and given us a larger purpose beyond ourselves.

The New Testament texts also speak to our existence as a fellowship of God’s people. However, this time it is in the form of a series of blessings-- a form common in the ancient world. In Jewish literature, but also in Greek literature, we find lists of sayings that begin with blessed or happy. “Blessed are they who find love and its bliss”, or “blessed are those who find knowledge”.

The tone of voice behind these sayings is one of congratulations! Congratulations, you are privileged for you have found love! Congratulations, you are most fortunate because you have a new grandchild! Congratulations! You are lucky for you have inherited great wealth!

In the beatitudes in Matthew, there is both a note of congratulations and a promise. Congratulations, for you have been privileged to know what God’s kingdom is all about and a promise that you will receive the fullness of the kingdom in the future.

These sayings begin a larger section of teachings of Jesus that we generally call the sermon of the mount. They are a kind of prologue, or poem, that sets the tone for the rest of the teaching. This series of sayings remind the listeners of who they are in God’s sight, of their basic identity as people of God. But they also speak directly to the kind of social order or community life that God was initiating through Jesus’ ministry. And they promise that God will bring this new order, the “kingdom of God” into our experience right now and ever more fully in the future.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, knowing full well the varying experiences that they bring with them from the past as they form a new community. Jesus also recognizes the kind of life that they will experience as they follow him to the cross and beyond. He is not idealistic but rather speaks of the real in-depth struggles that they will have. And Jesus wants to empower them for their journey as a community of disciples. He wants to encourage them and support them as they grow into a sign of God’s reign.

Jesus does this in the form of congratulating the people for who they are and who they will become.

Note that this is not just a list of virtues that are expected of the followers of Jesus, sort of like a series of commandments. Neither is Jesus saying, “Congratulations for being such wonderful people, you will get your reward because you are so virtuous that you deserve it.” Rather, the sense is more: “Congratulations for choosing to become part of the community of God’s people. Your life will be rich and fulfilling because God is gracious and is acting in your midst. You will have the privilege of participating with God’s actions as God brings in the “kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven”

This sense of being privileged does remind me of when I first began to attend congregational meetings. That was still during the time when the “brotherhood” made all the decisions for the congregation. Women were not invited to those meetings and did not have a vote. However, at age 15, I was able to attend the Canadian Conference when they met for their annual sessions in Niagara, my home town. The conference had decided to have a special meeting for the youth at one of the sessions. I experienced the excitement of being part of a larger community, of listening to the visions and the debates around several issues and participating with the youth in responding to those issues. I was anxious to also do this in my home congregation.

By the time I was baptized at age 17 our church had decided to open the meetings to women and so I was able to attend those meetings as well. I must admit that I soon lost some of my idealism-- but I have continued to be enthusiastic about the possibility of God working through these meetings. Now hundreds and perhaps thousands of meetings later, I sometimes forget how privileged I am to be invited into something so important—a gathering of God’s people to make the practical decisions that will impact both the community itself but also the particular societal setting in which the church finds itself.

The scholars version of the Beatitudes translates the Beatitudes by beginning with the word “congratulations.” I want to read the Beatitudes again in my own paraphrase using that same term. As you listen to it, imagine Jesus saying it to us here at MFM as a community of followers of Jesus. He is saying this to us at our annual meeting, because as a community we have already tasted something of the truth of these sayings . And he wants to assure us that we will continue to experience the richness and the abundance of life, as we open ourselves to being transformed ever more into a sign of God’s kingdom here on earth.

*Congratulations to you who recognize the poverty of your own spirit
For God's kingdom belongs to you.*

*Congratulations to you who lament and grieve
For you will be consoled.*

*Congratulations to you who are gentle and humble
For you will inherit the goodness of creation.*

*Congratulations to you who hunger for justice
You will have a feast.*

*Congratulations to you who are merciful
For you will receive mercy*

*Congratulations to you whose hearts and motives are undefiled
For you will see God active in your midst*

*Congratulations to you who are peacemakers
For you will be named the children of God*

*Congratulations to you who have been misunderstood, even persecuted
for the sake of justice*

For you will have the privilege of entering into God's kingdom

*Congratulations to you if people revile you and accuse you of evil falsely
for the sake of your commitment to me. (for that is the way prophets have been treated in the past)*

*Rejoice and be glad, for though we see only dimly what is in store for us today,
we will one day see fully the riches God has for us in all eternity.*

Together Micah and Matthew point us to our most basic identity as people of God. They remind us of the kind of God we worship and ask us to form our community in such a way that it reflects our love and loyalty to that God. May we experience God's presence in our midst this afternoon both congratulating us and holding us accountable. For the God we worship is just and merciful and wishes to walk alongside us both in our struggles and in our joys.

Amen