

**Resonant Themes****Micah 6.1–8 & Matthew 5.1–12****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 30 January 2005**

If you know nothing else about the Christian tradition, you probably know the Beatitudes. And if you know nothing else about the Hebrew Bible, you ought to know Micah 6.8, especially if you're a member of a UCC congregation. These might even be the two dominant, formative texts for progressive Christians. (Actually, I'd take the Beatitudes from the sixth chapter of Luke's gospel, because I think they are a bit harsher and probably closer to what Jesus actually said. It's a lot easier to say "Blessed are the poor in spirit" than it is to internalize "Blessed are the poor," which is how Luke relates Jesus' words.)

When I was a young person growing up in the UCC, we didn't learn a whole lot about the Bible, which I'm glad to say we're remedying here at Plymouth. But, I do remember memorizing Matthew's version of the beatitudes. What Jesus does with these rejoinders of blessings is to set out a social agenda – an agenda that turns the conventional wisdom of his day on its head. I mean, really, who wants to be poor in spirit or grief-stricken or meek or hungry for justice or persecuted for the sake of righteousness or to be despised because of what you believe? Not to many of us, I'm sure. Yet, Jesus says that we are fortunate to be in these dire straits. And sometimes it's not easy to be compassionate or pure in heart or to be a voice for peace when the rest of the people around you clamber for war. Yet, we are supposed to rejoice and be glad. What was Jesus thinking???



This pair of texts, like all others in the Revised Common Lectionary, comes up every three years. And the last time I preached on them was a First Congregational UCC in Loveland. When I was in the search process for a new call, I decided that for each call sermon, I'd preach from the lectionary, and it was on that Sunday that Plymouth's search committee came to hear me in that neutral pulpit (which also happened to be Sharon's neutral pulpit during her candidacy). So, I have an even warmer place in my heart for these passages.

On that Sunday three years ago, I addressed the way some Christians erroneously perceive a dramatic discontinuity between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. You know the stereotype: the God of wrath versus the God of love. Wrong! The prophet Micah ends his prophecy this way: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."<sup>1</sup>

So much for the Old Testament God of wrath! (Of course, we can find references to horrendous actions people attribute to God in the Hebrew Bible, but it's not a uniform account of an avenging God of war.) Likewise, in the New Testament, we have a really hideous account of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira, who withheld some of their wealth from the apostle Peter and the community which was committed to sharing all property in common. The Reader's Digest version is that both Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead for their greed and deception. So, the God of the New Testament isn't always the God of forgiveness and agape.

In that sermon I gave in Loveland, I spoke at some length about the Hebrew notion of *sedekh* and the Greek concept of *dike*, both of which can be translated as "justice" or

---

<sup>1</sup> Micah 7.18–19

“righteousness.” But I’m not going to go there today, other than to point out that this concept of God’s justice (which is often distributive or restorative justice, and not so typically vengeance) provides a dramatic point of continuity between the Hebrew social prophets and Jesus. It’s also what made them tremendously unpopular, and it’s one of the reasons prophets didn’t (and still don’t) lead long, relaxed lives that extend well into old age.



Today, though, I’d like to talk about another resonant theme that both Jesus and Micah address, and one that connects with my sermon last week on reclaiming the word “repentance.” Again, this is a concept that most Protestants are not so likely to address: humility.

For a lot of us, especially women, being humble in our culture meant or means being “less than,” or being lower on the totem pole, that you’re not quite as worthy as someone else. Let’s just eliminate that connotation of humility right now. Neither Micah nor Jesus is talking about that kind of oppressive force. Humility does not mean being a doormat.

Nor is being humble anything like Charles Dickens’ awful character Uriah Heep, who feigns humility. If you remember that creepy character from *David Copperfield*, you might remember that he is a snakelike creature who is the very embodiment of obsequiousness – the very opposite of true humility. Humility is not a show we put on for others; it’s got to be a deep, inner attitude. Humility is not what others think of us, it’s a way we can think of ourselves.

I really like the way Frederick Buechner describes humility, using a card-game metaphor: “Humility is often confused with the polite self-deprecation of saying you’re not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

If you really aren’t much of a bridge player, you’re apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy.

True humility doesn’t consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.”<sup>2</sup>

So, perhaps humility is about seeing ourselves in perspective. It’s about seeing ourselves not just in relation to ourselves, but in relation to other people, in relation to the earth, and in relation to God.

There have been times in my life – really difficult times – when this has become clearer to me: When I was 24 and my dad died of a heart attack. That made me know on a visceral level that death was real: that we are, indeed, mortal. During the Ash Wednesday service each year, I think of my parents when I say, “from dust you come, to dust you shall return.” On the one hand, it may seem morbid to some of us to say that and to have a bit of palm ash imposed. But acknowledging our mortality is one of the things that church tradition does to help give us perspective. We may be “a little lower than angels,” but one of the things that unites everyone in this room is that at some point, each of us will die. Now, that doesn’t play well in the mainstream media. Advertisers want to us delude ourselves to believe that we can stay (or look) young forever (if we just take Geritol or

---

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973.) pp. 47-8.

drive a Lexus SUV or get a couple of strategically placed Botox injections...we won't talk about hair replacement). In doing so, they've lulled us into a national state of denial about our finitude and our humanity.

Both the words "human" and "humility" derive from the Latin *humus*, which means earth. So, when I say "from dust you come; to dust you shall return," it's reinforcing not just our humility but also our humanity.

Being humble is acknowledging that each of us is not the center of the universe, and that neither are we collectively – as Christians or Americans or members of the UCC or even as human beings – the center of the universe. Sometimes we even begin to think of ourselves as being ultimately in charge. The retirement information I get from Fidelity Investments tries to convince me that I'm in control of my retirement (and I think President Bush is trying to go in that direction with Social Security, too!). But the reality is that I may never live to see my 401(k) payout; in the final analysis, I'm not in control. So, part of humility is letting go of the pretense that we can control what will be, and instead turning some of that control and worry over to the Holy Spirit.

That reminds me of the classic Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts." "'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, and when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'twill be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend, we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn will be our delight 'til by turning, turning we come round right." It seems to me that that kind of simplicity is akin to humility in terms of "finding ourselves in the place just right."

In Greek tragedy, hubris is the distinctive sense of being anything but humble, and it usually results some form of disaster. So, where do you see hubris in your own life? Are there times in your life when you think "it's all about me," and you lose track of what's going on with those around you? Are there times in public life in this country when we do the same sort of thing? When we fail to steward the integrity of creation by protecting air, water, soil, and forests or when we drive monster SUVs instead of conserving fossil fuels, we're displaying our national hubris, and none of us is off the hook! We need to see ourselves in accurate perspective within the universe in which we live.

True humility is neither self-abasement nor self-aggrandizement, but rather knowing our true place among others, in the cosmos, and in relation to God. It is a core virtue not just in Christian tradition, but in many of the world's religions. Islam teaches that "All people are children of Adam, and Adam was created from soil."<sup>3</sup>

Which gets us back to the Jewish tradition of Micah: How do we walk humbly with God? We should see ourselves not as we wish to be seen by others, but rather we ought to see ourselves as God sees us: as God's children; as imperfect; as one significant, small part of humanity; as part of nature; as God's beloved. When we have a true sense of ourselves – the sense that God has about us – it will enable us to be in closer communion with the divine with others and with ourselves. An attitude of humility will also help us engender an attitude of thankfulness to God. And as we live with both humility and with gratitude, the fruits of our hands and our hearts will be justice and peace.

May we walk humbly with God, knowing our true place in the world. May we be inheritors of the earth. And may we be live in the knowledge that we are connected to self, to others, to the cosmos, and most intimately to God.

Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hadith of Tirmidhi