

Sermon for 6/2/19  
Easter 7C

With my ministry at Trinity Church quickly drawing to a close, I can't help but be a bit nostalgic. I look back on all the people that I had the opportunity to get know and to work with over the years. I remember some of the wonderful people who have passed on or who have moved away. I rejoice in the growth of the young people who have been part of Trinity Church. I think of some of the things that I've done that have worked well ... and some of the things that didn't work as well. One thing in particular that I keep coming back to is Micah Ecumenical Ministries.

I know that pride is on the official list of the seven deadly sins, but I have to admit that I'm proud to have been one of the people who helped start this organization. To think that in only 13 years, Micah has grown from a simple ministry in the basement of Jamison Hall into a ministry that touches the lives of hundreds – perhaps thousands – of people every year. It's viewed as a model program: other communities often consult with Micah to understand how they can build their own ministries. There are people who are alive today and able to live productive lives because of Micah.

In reading today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles, I was struck by how Micah's story echoes this episode in Paul's ministry. Please allow me to draw a few parallels. We started talking about Micah in 2003 when a number of clergy people in Fredericksburg became fed up with the lack of services for some of the neediest people in the community. There was a large population of homeless people who were not being served, often due to issues of addiction or to emotional problems. Many of them set up campsites under bridges, deep in the woods, or along the river; they rarely received medical care or enough to eat. These were the people we wanted to serve: Jesus was always ready to minister to the outcast and so we decided that we would try to do the same. Quite frankly, we were mad at the way some of God's people were being treated. We were angry and we used our anger as motivation.

In the story in Acts, a woman who "had a spirit of divination" began following Paul and Silas as they ministered and preached in Philippi of Macedonia. As she followed them, she proclaimed, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to us a way of salvation." Although what she was saying was the truth, scripture tells us that Paul got annoyed at having to listen to her day after day. In other words, he got mad and in his anger he said to the spirit that possessed the woman, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" and she was healed. Both Paul and the clergy of Fredericksburg used anger as a motivating force to be able to do what was right.

As Micah grew and was able to reach out to more people in need, some people in the community began to complain. The issue was that some shop owners believed that having a place downtown where homeless people could go to get a shower, clothes, counseling, and more was a public nuisance. They believed that the simple presence of a downtown ministry to homeless people would hurt their business. It became common to hear people claim that since Micah was giving so much help to homeless people that it had become a magnet, drawing clients from long distances; one local politician, with no basis in fact, even accused Micah of drawing clients from people being released from the D.C. jails. As time went on and the statistics began to make clear that Micah was doing an excellent job of getting people off the streets and into housing those critical voices began to die down. Today, however, with more and more people becoming homeless (Virginia is one of the most aggressive states in the country when it comes to eviction), with the closing down of some of the homeless camps where people had

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been living for years, and with an increasing number of young people being told to get out of their homes when they turn 18, homeless people are becoming more visible in Fredericksburg once again. Most of them really have no place to go. And, once again, looking for a scapegoat, some residents and business owners are blaming Micah for the very problem that it works so hard to solve. After a few years of fairly widespread community support, some voices are beginning to be heard criticizing Micah's work.

In the Book of Acts, the people who owned the slave who had a spirit of divination were upset at losing one of their streams of income. They complained to the public authorities about what had happened and also brought false charges against Paul and Silas. The two evangelists were arrested, beaten, and locked up in jail just because they healed a woman who needed to be healed. Rightly or wrongly, whether it is some business people in Fredericksburg or some slave owners in ancient Macedonia, when people perceive a potential threat to their income, they'll ask for help from the local authorities and even resort to falsehoods to further their agenda.

Micah has continued and will continue to build its ministry. Today in Fredericksburg, all people can find a free breakfast and a free dinner every day of the week somewhere in the city. People have been placed in homes with appropriate support from community service organizations. People who were once seen as hopeless and unworthy are now treated with respect and have hope for their futures. Many are able to find God's love and support, realizing that it was the love of God in Jesus Christ that has taken care of them through the work of the churches in Fredericksburg that make up Micah.

Even though Paul and Silas were imprisoned, they kept witnessing to God in Christ. They sang hymns and prayed through the night. An earthquake happened that opened the doors to the prisoners' cells and loosened all their chains. The jailer, wakened from his slumber, was ready to kill himself because he thought that his prisoners had escaped. Paul stopped him saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer, overcome by their kindness and faith, asked them to teach him how to be saved. He and his whole family were baptized and began to follow Jesus. Kindness, whether from a great evangelist or from some good, kind-hearted church people, can help others hear the message of Jesus Christ in a way that can transform their lives.

That the story of Micah resonates with the story of Paul and Silas in Macedonia is not an accident. Time and again we discover that the stories of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the Church are archetypes for many of the events in our lives. We have times of renewal that let us know that the resurrection is real. We have times of trouble that echo the stories of the Israelites in Egypt or of Jesus being tempted in the desert. We have moments of grace and joy that teach us that the experience of the apostles at Pentecost is true. The stories of the Bible are – over and over again – our stories. As we read them and learn them and experience them our faith grows. Then, through the grace of God and the love of Jesus Christ, we are ready to do the work that we are called to do.

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