

God's Toolbox

Micah 6: 1-8

Transylvania Presbytery Danville, Kentucky

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The 218th General Assembly which meets this summer has adopted as its theme the last two verses of the Micah text. And so it seemed appropriate for us at the presbytery level to reflect this year on this text as well.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Seems like a fairly straightforward word from the Lord, doesn't it? In an era when ours and other denominations are fractured over social and theological issues, perhaps the time is right to reexamine this simple, direct response to the question of what is required of the people of God.

We might observe that, despite its problems, the church today is in no worse condition than its pre-Christian antecedents. Things were not going well in Micah's eighth century BCE world. Micah paints a picture of a society in which the rich and powerful use their influence to exploit the vulnerable; a society where the gap between rich and poor is growing and where inequality is the name of the game.

If we fast forward nearly 900 years, when Paul was planting the first Christian churches, we learn from his letters that things were not going so well then either.

The people were squabbling. Sometimes they asked Paul to resolve disputes with deep theological underpinnings. But often they were bickering over seemingly minor concerns -- how folks should act in church, what they should wear, how they cut their hair, and so forth.

When I first arrived in Lawrenceburg I heard a lot of talk about the church sign, which had only recently been replaced. There had been literally years of debate about replacing the old sign, about what the new design should look like and so on. It caused a great deal of anguish in the congregation, and it still comes up sometimes when people start getting afraid, afraid that another divisive, time-consuming controversy might erupt.

So what is it about churches and, by extension, our presbytery? Maybe when everyone expects -- and rightly so -- a chance to voice an opinion and have that opinion heard and considered -- perhaps that sets up the potential for conflict. I believe people often are drawn to churches not only to worship God, but to work out their issues. And I say good. Church is a good place for that, or at least it should be.

In the 14th Chapter of Romans, Paul calls on the congregants to refrain from putting stumbling blocks in the way of another person. "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding," he says.

Building up the church is an ongoing concern for Paul, and anything that gets in the way of that is troublesome. It is important for us to look at how things get in the way. It is important for us to consider what gets in the way of us doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

Which brings me to God's toolbox.

Whenever we are conflicted over a sign or an organ or what kind of bread to use for communion or one of any number of issues I hear about in churches; or, in the larger context of our denomination, when we become fractured over our differences, I have an image of God's toolbox. I

will explain this image after we name some of the conflicts that have caused us concern in recent years.

Here in Transylvania Presbytery, as in presbyteries across the country, we don't agree on abortion, on whether our pension fund should on occasion pay for an abortion; we don't agree on whether gays and lesbians should be ordained as clergy and elders; we differ over environmental concerns; we don't agree on a path to salvation for non-Christians -- some of us plan on having a conversation with Gandhi in heaven, some of us plan on having a conversation with Gandhi in hell; more particularly, here, we differ on allocation of resources, on church development and redevelopment, on how to structure our presbytery meetings, on how -- or not -- to support our camp, on where the office should be, and on and on. When we bump up against one of these issues, I have an image of God rumbling through this rather extensive set of tools, picking one out and tossing it to us. Okay, maybe sometimes hurling it at us!

God's most often-used tool may be the conflict itself. Because, you see, I believe that God uses these conflicts to force us into relationships that we might otherwise not have, to force us to listen and hear, to force us into working out our stuff that we may in some measure move closer to the kingdom.

Of course, more often than not, we ignore God's efforts in this regard, as we do in many things. Instead of using the tools we are sent, we find ways to avoid them. Instead of confronting the issues that divide us; instead of trying to understand each other; instead of trying out a bit of empathy; instead of picking up those tools and working with them that we might reconcile ourselves to each other and start to create something akin to the kingdom of God; instead of any of that, what we are more likely to do is choose up sides, argue for awhile, declare winners and losers, and move on. Either that, or we leave the tools laying around, tripping over them now and then before we shove them in a closet so we can ignore them, even though they eventually fall out and become what we euphemistically refer to as the elephant in the room.

Our failure to use God's tools properly is fraught with tragic consequences. Some of you might disagree with me that a system comprised of winners and losers is unhealthy in the church, as well as in the workplace and just about any place else in our society -- except maybe in the sports arena. Some of you will say, well, that's just the way it is.

But listen to what Paul says at the beginning of Romans 15. "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor." I would add to that, and I don't think Paul would object, that it is also for the good purpose of building up the neighborhood!

But even more, our refusal to find real accommodation with each other -- with those with whom we disagree -- is a tragedy because it creates ongoing trepidation. Uneasiness. Maybe even fear. Sometimes it creates enough fear and trepidation that people simply stop showing up. But even for those who stay, whether they call themselves winners or losers, our churches and our presbytery no longer feel safe. We have to be on our guard. What will happen next, we wonder. We're unsteady. We don't know quite how to perceive ourselves or each other. We stop thinking of ourselves as sisters and brothers in Christ, and instead see each other as potential rivals to be dealt with in some form or fashion over the next issue that arises.

And when that happens, when we refuse to confront the underlying issues that cause this unease, this dis-ease, it is only natural for us to disengage. And when we disengage, we lose our passion. And when we lose our passion, there is no way we can even begin to respond to Micah's interrogative. We can't do what the Lord requires of us and we most certainly cannot experience the joy that Christ invites us to be a part of. And then we're all losers.

We become like a basketball team that has an abundance of different plays, different maneuvers it can use to score points. But instead of practicing to see which ones work the best, the team members refuse to play with each other.

We forget that we have a common goal.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. I think this is the kind of passage that most of us love. It's easy to remember. It's easy to understand. None of the theological mumbo-jumbo with which we often struggle. Not so easy, though, to live.

But there is hope, my friends. There is hope because God puts so many more tools at our disposal, if only we would learn to use them. We have to be willing to keep fiddling and praying for instructions so that we can put them to good use.

The main tool, of course, is love. Not feel-good sentimentality, but active: do, love, walk. The kind of love that calls us to justice because we hear the cries. The kind of love that calls us to extraordinary kindness and generosity of spirit. The kind of love that cannot exist outside of our own humility before God.

It is love that requires us to confront and even embrace our conflicts rather than stuffing them in the closet or in the garbage where they inevitably will spill over and cause irreparable damage. We must face these challenges in our churches and in our lives because it is God's work, God's desire to pull us together into relationship.

You know, O mortal, what is good.

We have an opportunity today to begin this work. Even though many of us already know and love Richard Smith, today we enter into a new covenant with him, a new relationship. What better time to begin something new in this presbytery. I'm reminded of something that Joan Gray said when she was here last December. She was talking about how many of our churches are struggling, some of them struggling just to keep the doors open. And so this is a moment, she said, for us to listen ever more carefully for the Spirit, a time for us to plow deeper spiritually. I have a dream that our presbytery can become a great encourager, a supporter, a great asset in this endeavor.

What would it be like if, through worship and fellowship and a lot more fun and laughter, we left presbytery meetings this year feeling fed, feeling invigorated, feeling up to the monumental challenges that we face in our churches? What if we left feeling inspired to do justice? What if we left as the givers and recipients of radical, loving kindness? What if we enter this journey together, supported and sustained and nourished together by our humble walk with God?

In the name of the Holy One who calls and equips us, amen.