

**FIRST PARISH CHURCH  
BRUNSWICK, MAINE  
January 30, 2005  
ANNETTE MOTT, UCC MAINE CONFERENCE**

Micah 6:1-8  
Matthew 5:1-12

This is not my first time in the pulpit of First Parish Church because in 1977-80, when I was director of Christian Education here, I preached a sermon once a year. It feels like a long time ago though.

It was a very blessed time for me when I was working and ministering in this church. This is a congregation I dearly love. I always hold you in my heart, and I pray for you regularly. I am so glad to see the wonderful work you do in this community and the wider church.

When, in preparation for Conference Sunday, I looked at the lessons appointed for this day, my heart went up when I saw the message from Micah, because these are precious words to me and I think probably to many of us, particularly verse 8. Micah has asked us, "Oh mortal, what is good, and what does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Those are words that I have often returned to and heard in their personal address as we all should.

When I began to prepare the sermon, I realized that I had remembered the jewel and forgotten the setting--the words that just precede this. In what context were these words spoken? At the beginning of Chapter 6, we hear that God has an issue with Israel. He has a controversy. Indeed, He is bringing a lawsuit against God's people Israel, because they have fallen down on their side of the covenant. What God says is, "Come, Israel, we are going to have a lawsuit here. You must plead your case and make your defense for the way you have forgotten the covenant. What we shall have for witnesses will be the hills and the mountains and the foundations of the earth to decide between you and me." God then calls on the hills and the mountains that have been there since the beginning of creation and have witnessed the whole relationship of God and God's people. These hills and mountains have seen from the beginning God's liberation and how God has lived with the people. Most particularly, the hills and the mountains were the witness to the very beginning of the covenant.

God goes on to say, “Oh, My people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” God calls like a loving husband, “Don’t you remember when I brought you out of Egypt? Don’t you remember when I redeemed you from slavery? When I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam?” Then he speaks about King Balak and Balaam and how King Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel. But God goes on to say that, through divine intervention in the form of a donkey (who is a lot smarter than Balaam), the curse is reversed and Balaam ends up delivering a blessing to the people instead. Finally, that allusion to “...from Shittim to Gilgal” is a reminder of when the Israelites crossed over the Jordan from the wilderness experience into the Promised Land. God is rehearsing with the people all the ways that God has freed them and been faithful to them.

The next thing we hear is the voice of Israel speaking back– an individual voice saying that they don’t try to justify their wrong-doing. They seem to accept the fact that they have, indeed, failed in their covenant. Now the question is, “What shall we do? How can we restore the relationship?” The language then becomes the whole language of the sacrificial and religious system. “How about an offering? What offering would be satisfactory? Would a big offering, a great offering, or even an offering of a first-born be adequate?” Then Micah steps in as a prophet and speaks the words with which we are all so familiar. “He has told you, Oh mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

I realize that I have always heard those word personally, but actually God is talking to God’s people. God is saying that these words are addressed to you as a people, as a community, as My people, as My community of faith. This really hit me, because so often in our life together, whether in our congregation, our conference, or in the larger body of the United Church of Christ, what I often hear is the same sort of juxtaposition between spirituality and politics/social issues. What I often hear is that the church should stay with spiritual matters and keep out of politics and social matters. The business of the church is religion and spirituality. Well, God seems to be saying something a little different. God seems to ask, “In what does spirituality consist? What is religion; what is spirituality?” God is addressing that not just to us individually but also to us in our life together, in our congregational life together.

What does life walking with God look like? The first thing we hear is “to do justice.” The Biblical commentaries all point out that this word does not mean for us simply to think about justice or to philosophize about justice as a concept, but as an act--to act justice, to do justice, to do that which God calls us to do justly. I think we get ourselves bound up in the arguments congregations have over politics and social issues, where we surely range from one end to the other on the

spectrum. Sometimes we think, “I don’t want someone telling me what to do or think.” What God says is you’ve got to be called into that movement of justice which is His own.

In each of the three movements we are going to be looking at--the doing of justice, the loving of kindness, and the walking humbly--it is not only what we are called to do but it is also telling us something about who God is. Who is this God we walk with? There is always the danger that we are walking with a false God and not the true one. So these words both unfold the call to us--what we are to be as the community of God--and they remind us who the God is that we are called to walk with. The hope is that we will be something like that God, that hopefully the apple will not fall far from the tree. We are reminded that God is a God of justice, and that means that God has decided attitudes with regard to the poor, the oppressed, those on the margins of life and those outside the margins. We have, as the people of God, to take seriously what God is saying to us and let it work its way into our hearts and spirits. We need to do that as a people together, as God’s people together.

The next part of Micah talks about “loving kindness.” The Hebrew word used there is used a lot in the Old Testament; it is “hesed.” The important thing about that word is that it cannot be translated in English by only one word. It is not just love, not just compassion, but has a dimension of faithfulness to it as well. It connotes loyalty and steadfast love, not a sentimental love. The word “kindness” sometimes does not have the strength to it that it needs; it is a strong love, it is a rigorous love, a resilient love, and a lasting love. We are reminded of God’s faithfulness, but at the same time we hear that call, “That is the kind of love I need for you to have for one another.”

What does that mean in practical terms in congregational life? Of course, it is lots of things, but there is one thing I want to focus on today. When we as a congregation are trying to address issues of justice, we will disagree with one another, sometimes strongly. We will get angry with one another. The temptation is to turn away from one another or to say, “I am going to stay with what I think because I like what I think and I am going to stay right there.” This “steadfast love” means that we stay with one another, that we continue to listen to one another in honesty and humility, and that, together, we focus on God’s word, trying to hear what that word is saying to us today. It is hard discipline, I know. I am devoted to my opinions and beliefs as each of you is to yours, but we have to stay open to one another, with open hearts, open minds, but mostly open spirits to what God is calling us to do.

There is no easy Biblical machine to bring together a particular issue with the Bible, then get a result, an answer at the end. I am going to use an issue that I think

most of you are not strongly conflicted about anymore. I find it safer to pull out issues from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century than from our own, for example, the issue of slavery. You know how that tore the church apart in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both sides could appeal to scripture, whether for or against slavery. If I am against slavery, I can talk about “In Christ there is neither free nor slave.” I’m going to talk about kingdom values and all that sort of thing. If I want to support slavery, I am going to remember that Paul told slaves to submit to their masters. In one letter in the New Testament, he instructed a slave to return to his master. So there is no easy scriptural answer. It is always that hard work of loving community seriously, trying to listen to what God is saying to us today, and respectfully knowing that sometimes we won’t hear the same things. But, because we share in God’s steadfast love, we stay together; we stay with it until, we hope, at some point we have clarification. In the meantime, we continue as best we can to do the acts of justice, as God gives us sight, and to do the works of mercy.

The last part of this passage from Micah is “to walk humbly with your God.” Again, what might that mean for our congregational life together? Just as God is just, so we are to be just. Knowing of God’s steadfast love, we are to be steadfast, too. God is humble, and that is why we are to be humble. We sometimes forget that as we think of the majesty and the great power of God, but I call to your minds the first verse of the closing hymn. Listen to it very carefully today as we are talking about God who wears our face.

“Community of Christ, who make the Cross your own,  
Live out your creed and risk your life for God alone.  
The God who wears your face, to whom all worlds belong,  
Whose children are of every race and every song.”

Did you know that the root word for both “human” and “humble” is “humus, soil of the earth?” We are reminded that in God’s humility, God humbled God’s self to take the form of a servant, to take our face, to become human. Because God himself is humble, so should we walk humbly with our God. And, as we walk humbly, committing ourselves to God’s work and God’s spirit and sometimes even sacrificing a special and dearly held opinion, so, in that way, we walk humbly with one another and we listen to each other. We think maybe we still have something to learn.

It is a hard work being that kind of people of God. Sometimes one gets angry and frustrated and impatient. But, hopefully, we will be the apples not too far from the tree, and, as we live and walk our humble walk with God, in some small way we will be more conformed to be like God, as true followers. Amen.