

Be. Attitudes.
Pastor Cynthia Lapp
January 30, 2011

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

I have to admit that a few weeks ago when I looked ahead to today's lectionary texts, I groaned. As Mennonites and justice seeking Christians, these scriptures from Micah and Matthew are not only familiar, they are foundational. These are the texts we turn to for inspiration, information and consolation. What more can possibly be said about Micah 6 and Matthew's beatitudes?

The Sermon on the Mount is formational for Anabaptists, so much so that my paternal grandmother, when she was baptized in 1918, memorized the whole thing. (And it was my grandmother that I was thinking of when I chose the song "blessed are the persecuted"— #230 the Zambian version of the Beatitudes — to be sung at my wedding to Eric. My feminist friends wrongly assumed it was because I was still angry at the institution of marriage, but really, it was my grandmother I was remembering and honoring.)

My grandmother has been gone more than 25 years, but I still imagine and wonder what it was like for this adolescent Mennonite girl in pigtails to learn chapters 5-7 from Matthew, by heart. What impact did it have on her life as she grew up? She married a young man who became a Mennonite minister and later a bishop, raised nine children, baked, gardened, cooked, canned, entertained, even had her parents and developmentally disabled uncle living with the family. What blessings came with having memorized these blessings, parables and re-envisioned laws?

Since these two passages of holy text are essential and part of who we are, we need to revisit them often. As living text they not only comfort us, they prod us to wrestle with them as a community as well as personally.

The text from Micah 6 is familiar, but the part we know the best, and quote most often, is the punch line. It is helpful to remember the story that comes before. The prophet is putting together a court case on God's behalf. God is the plaintiff, bringing a case against the people of Israel because of their greed, injustice, cruelty, because they have forgotten who they are and who God is. Armies amass against Israel, and God seems so angry as to be glad about this. And yet this God of everlasting grace gives the people another chance.

God calls on the mountains and the earth to act as witnesses in court. God reminds the people of what God has done, beginning with the exodus from slavery and the leaders they were given. The people, confronted once again with their history of unfaithfulness, act as if they have never heard the story. It is as if they do not know how to respond. "How shall I approach such a God? What sacrifice do I need to make? What does God want? Is it my first born that God wants?"

And God responds with what now is a familiar phrase — God has told what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

The New English Bible brings a different flavor to this instruction: "only to act justly, to love loyalty and walk wisely before your God." These are different enough concepts in English — loyalty and mercy, humbleness and wisdom — that it may be confusing. Yet this points to the complexity that we must embrace.

Scott Anderson, a former Presbyterian minister, writes in Christian Century magazine this week about Micah. He notes that this is not a disjointed three part process that we are to follow: do justice — check, love mercy — check, walk humbly with God — check. Justice, mercy, humility, loyalty and wisdom: these are all intertwined so that to do or be one leads to another. “Doing justice must include being merciful. A humble walk with God must embody justice.” (Christian Century, January 24, 2011)

This is the kind of intricacy we display as individuals. How can I separate out who I am as a woman, married to a man, a feminist, mother to three children, a Christian, Mennonite, white, middle class with good credit, pastor (of an astounding congregation). There are perhaps other descriptors that could be added. How does one tease out which comes first, which is most important?

Perhaps rather than trying to choose adjectives that describe us, we are better off choosing this list of intertwined verbs that Micah gives us. Anderson says together these “form a holistic, dynamic lifestyle that sends us out into a world that God continues to redeem.” Just as I cannot separate my being a woman from my being Christian or my being a mother from my being a feminist, neither can we separate our work for justice from the recognition that we are not in charge — God is in charge. Our role is to work together with each other and God to bring justice, mercy, loyalty, wisdom and more awareness of God into the world.

Though we may all be committed to justice, mercy and humility, we live this out in different ways. I witnessed justice and mercy at work last evening at a candlelight vigil for the Zelaya-Hernandez family, a local family that lost two daughters and their home in

a house fire last week. The community has come together to provide clothing, housing, emotional and financial support. The work of justice and mercy has united people of different backgrounds, people of faith and people with no religious tradition.

It was ironic, and a bit gruesome, to be standing outside this burned house with fire in our hands. A friend explained that we were redeeming the fire. Just like God? We read in Micah that God points out how far astray the people have gone, again. Yet God is willing to redeem them, to hold them in the holy hand and say that they can be used for good.

Some of us think about justice, mercy and walking humbly with God when we try to understand the decision to hold the 2013 Mennonite Church USA church convention in Phoenix, Arizona. The Internet is a flurry with conversation, interrogation and even accusation. How can we go as a denomination to Phoenix, where it is unsafe for our Latino sisters and brothers in the church? How does this show mercy and love? On the other hand, how is forfeiting half a million dollars a responsible use of the resources we have been given? Shouldn't we go to the places where injustice is found so that we can speak out for justice?

There are no easy answers to these questions, no easy ways to stand with those who have lost a family member in tragedy.

The Beatitudes approach the issues from a different angle. It is almost as if Jesus looked around at those who followed him to the mountain, those who had it the hardest and said, "Just wait, you will be blessed. It is obvious what your need is and you will receive what you need." Good news but is it really that simple? Who is going to

show mercy? Who is going to comfort the grieving? How will the poor be blessed? And when? Rejoice and be glad at being persecuted?

The Beatitudes have become part of my life in a new way the past months as I have been praying with the Anabaptist Prayer Book. One week a month, the Beatitudes appear as part of the morning and evening prayer cycle. As I recite these “blessed”s new questions arise.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice. What does that mean? We all get hungry, we all get thirsty, but some of us seek a quick meal. Others take longer to prepare food. Some of us want to eat alone; others want to open the table to all who are hungry. How do we cook together, to satisfy our hunger? How do we dole out the chores of preparing the meal for which we so hunger? Are we all making the same recipe? Do we have to? Do we really hunger for justice? How thirsty are we?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for justice sake, yes. But doesn't Jesus say just a few verses later to pray for those who persecute you? Are we blessed by praying for our persecutors? Most of us straight, white folks hardly count as the persecuted; our lives are pretty comfortable. We may in fact be the persecutors who need to be prayed for. Who will receive the blessing?

Often the Beatitudes, the whole Sermon on the Mount, are marginalized as words for another time. They are great ideas but they are not practical; there is no way this can really be put into practice. One of the crazy things about Anabaptists is that though many of us do not take the Bible literally, for some reason we do take this part,

the Sermon on the Mount, very seriously. We believe that we should try to live this way, try to embody these words.

I guess that fits in with what Paul says in I Corinthians 1, the other lectionary text for today.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, (in Isaiah)

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul may be writing about the foolishness of the cross, but the same could be said about the strangeness of praying for enemies and persecutors, expecting the meek to inherit the Earth, saying that it is a blessing to be reviled. None of it really makes sense through the lenses of those who are successful, who expect logic to rule. It is ridiculous to believe that we can even begin to live out Jesus' words.

And yet the world witnessed the foolish forgiveness of the Amish community at Nickel Mines, after their daughters were senselessly killed by a gunman. The blessing of peacemaking was seen far beyond that community, which in many ways closes itself off from the rest of the world.

It hardly compares, but sometimes I wonder about the foolishness of our continued engagement with Allegheny Conference the past five years, after being disciplined for living out the call to hospitality. Are we just being stubborn? Or is this small step of ours, to keep showing up, to keep trying to love and work with those with whom we disagree, is this part of what it means to take these words of Jesus seriously? Is this hungering after righteousness? Who is being filled?

As a 12 year old, my grandmother memorized the Sermon on the Mount. How foolish to waste her time with that much of the Bible. As a girl she would never be a preacher. She didn't even go past the eighth grade in school. But *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

May we look to God's foolishness and God's weakness as we seek to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.