

“Blessed Living”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
January 30, 2011
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

In last Sunday’s sermon I was trying to remember the name of the host of an old TV program, “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom.” Some of you reminded me it was Marlin Perkins. “That’s right,” I said. I needed to be reminded because I had forgotten. His name hadn’t entirely left me, but for a long time I didn’t have any need to remember. There are a lot of things like that – our adult sibling’s birthdays, maybe, or that high school calculus that will never be recovered, or maybe a card game you played a few times years ago. If it were something we used or had reason to think about every day, we wouldn’t have to remember, we’d know.

Maybe that’s why God does a lot of reminding in the Bible, calling the people of God to remember who we are, who formed us, what we are to be about – because we tend to forget. Like Israel in our text from the book of the prophet Micah this morning, we lose sight of who we are and whose we are. But our faith is lodged in history, in what happened and to whom, including what has happened to us. Some religions or spiritual paths seek to escape history, its claims and responsibilities. The goal is to break free from the limitations of body and mind and enter another realm of existence. But our Christian faith won’t permit us to do that. We are reminded of flesh and blood things: “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam . . . that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.” (Micah) “What we received from the Lord we also pass on to you, that on the night that Jesus was betrayed he took bread . . .” (Paul, Corinthians). Real people, real time, real life. Maybe these things didn’t happen in exactly the ways they are passed on, but the precise

details aren't important. What is important is that God has acted in human life and history, so that we might connect, through our lives and our histories, with his saving love and power – so that we might live in this world in a new way, as new people.

But we forget. We live with so many requirements, and the complexities of life get us all turned around. There is a story of a very proper woman who went into a coffeehouse one day during her lunch hour. She sat at a table by herself and ordered a cup of coffee. She had a small package of cookies in her purse, which she planned to eat with her coffee. Because the place was crowded, a man happened to take the other chair at the table and also ordered a cup of coffee. The woman sat there casually reading her paper, and as she did she reached over and took one of the cookies from the package. Before long, she noticed that the man across the table had also helped himself to a cookie. This disturbed the woman, but she politely decided to ignore it and continued reading. After a while she took another cookie, and so did he. This unnerved her, and she glared at the man. To her astonishment, instead of apologizing to her, he reached for the fifth and final cookie. He smiled and offered her half of it. By this time she was indignant, so she quickly got up, paid her bill and left. Still muttering under her breath when she got to her car, she reached into her purse for her keys, and discovered there, unwrapped, her own package of cookies. It had been the gentleman's cookies all along!

There are times when we share this same kind of confusion, when we forget what properly belongs to whom. In the process we lose track of who we are and to whom we belong. Everything somehow gets turned upside down.

A few years ago, when the economy was humming at record rates, and people were working like crazy and consumer items of all kinds were flying off the shelves, it might have been concluded that we exist just in order to produce and consume. These days, if you are lucky enough to have a job, you're probably still working like crazy, but maybe as

a society we're being reminded that no, people produce and consume in order to exist, much like people need to eat in order to live, not the other way around.

Our priorities tend to get skewed when we forget who we are and whose we are. We hold on to the illusion of control we have over life by virtue of what we make and have, even if we've "earned" it. It goes all the way back to the beginning, you know. When God created the heavens and the earth, and scattered the galaxies to the furthest corners of the universe, the Almighty fashioned humankind and placed them in this garden paradise called Eden, with the expressed expectation that they would "till it and keep it." But before long humankind fell prey to the temptation of exercising a certain amount of control over it as well. Control eventually led to a sense of ownership. And before you knew it people were behaving less like guests of God's good creation and more and more like management.

In Micah's day government leaders had forgotten what rightly belonged to God. But more than that, he found them shamelessly helping themselves to what belonged to others. Their religion was dominated by formalism, in essence blessing the current power arrangements. For Micah, this amounted to a violent and willful assault upon God's desire for justice among people. Here in the 6th chapter Micah envisions Yahweh and Israel coming into the court room, with the mountains themselves serving as the jury: "What have I done to you? How have I wearied you? I want an answer! Don't you remember how I brought you up from Egypt and redeemed you from slavery? Do you forget all that we've been through together, how I have been there for you even when you turned away? Have you grown tired of the love that created you, indifferent to the life of blessing and humility by which I am known? When you turn away from your neighbor in need you turn away from me. I cannot be placated by your holy processions and your wordy liturgies, as if you could somehow pay me back for all that I have been to you. I don't want your sacrifices or your offerings of things. I only require that you do justice, that you love

kindness, that you walk humbly with me.”

As Jesus begins what has become known as his Sermon on the Mount, he enumerates the results of following these operating instructions, as he reverses the ways the world values and looks at people, from the honoring of ownership and control – and lifts up the indicators or signs of a “remembered” life. I like the way that Eugene Peterson puts it in his contemporary rendering of the scriptures (The Message):

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are – no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.”

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.”

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you’ll find yourselves cared for.”

“You’re blessed when your inside world – your mind and heart – are put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.”

“Not only that – count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens – give a

cheer, even – for though they don't like it, I do. And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

Remember?

Life certainly does tend to get complicated – but we can preoccupy ourselves with things that call for our immediate attention, and never make any progress on what is important, never even stopping to pray, to allow ourselves to be reminded. The important things require more time and intentionality. They define our priorities.

When our daughter was little she spent a lot of time upside down, doing cartwheels or standing on her hands against the wall. Do you remember how things looked upside down, with heaven at your feet and the ground at eye level? That's what the Beatitudes do, if we hear them right. They begin to help us see God's blessed ones in places we never would have thought to look. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “You begin to see that the meek, and the poor in spirit, and those who mourn are not just people you can help but people who can help you, if you let them, and that hunger and thirst for God are not voids to be filled but appetites to be envied.

You begin to see that those who are bruised for their faith are not sad but happy because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.”

God is inviting us to refresh our memories again, to recall who we are and whose we are, to let go of our posturing of management and control and live in humility and gratitude – with heaven at our feet, to walk through blessing every day, all life long.

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