

“What Does it Mean to be Great?” 1-29-17

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Our texts begin with questions. The Psalmist asks, “Who may dwell on your holy hill?” Micah asks, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?”

The crowds of Jesus’ day are asking questions as well. Roman control meant oppression and the diminishment of quality of life. Heavy taxes by government and wealthy landowners, even by the priests in Jerusalem, meant that the elite supported themselves on the backs of the poor. No one could get ahead. They “owed their souls to the company store” as Tennessee Ernie Ford sang in the song “Sixteen Tons”. People were commodities, valued for their labor, not for themselves. Injustice was the norm. The social system reflected vast discrepancies of wealth, not unlike what we witness statistically in the world today.

Jesus’ teaching and preaching on the Kingdom of God was creating an alternative vision of what society and human relationships might become. It still does. In Jesus’ kingdom God is at the center and it matters how people live and act in relationship with God and each other. Listening to Jesus teach in the midst of the Temple’s wealth, telling the people to beware of the religious elite while watching a poor widow being commended for putting all she had in the treasury, Mark says, “And the large crowd was listening with delight” (Mark 12:37).

Jesus, fresh from facing temptation and having called his disciples, has been going throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, healing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. His fame is spreading and great crowds are gathering to see him from all over. Seeing the crowds, he goes up the mountain, sits down, and lays out an alternative social vision which was radical then and is today as well.

What he says startles me every time. His words challenge my assumptions, my identity, the cultural milieu in which I live as well as the core set of values society has taught me implicitly and explicitly. Perhaps that is why the Sermon on the Mount has been dismissed as an interim ethic or as out of touch with reality as we know it and therefore unattainable. Is Jesus realistic? Doesn’t he know that the world doesn’t work this way? In the world that I live it is the strong that are blessed, the triumphant, those that achieve greatness through the status of power, the accumulation of money, education, and have climbed the ladder of career success.

Do I regard my life as blessed because of professional success? A comfortable lifestyle? Children who have done well? Good friends and family? Jesus is pressing the question of what it means to be blessed. Are those not blessed who are not experiencing these things? Does God think more of me and less of them?

Thinking along the same lines, the people in Micah’s day were asking what extravagant offerings are needed to placate and receive the blessing of the God of Israel. “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year

old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" Is superior religious performance what God is after?

That is how we think. We like to quantify things. It is ingrained. But that is not how God thinks. We always come back to Isaiah's word from God; "Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

Could God be challenging us to adopt a different way of looking at life? If we follow Micah and Jesus it would appear that qualities of character and behavior rise to the top.

Back in 2001, Jim Collins wrote a book entitled "Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't". Business leaders and those of us in church leadership gobbled this book up. We all want to be great and successful, so Collins was going to tell us how. He defined 'greatness' as 'distinctive impact', 'superior performance', and being a 'level five leader'. He tapped into the great American value we love, greatness.

One person fast forwarded Micah's question to the church: "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show him that we're successful? Is bigger, better, faster, and stronger the sign of the kind of church God blesses? The kind of nation God blesses? Is greatness what God is after?" (Homiletics, Jan-Feb, 2017, p.37).

What is greatness? How do we attain it? Of the eleven "great" companies profiled in his book, most are not so great a decade and a half later. Circuit City is out of business, Fannie Mae had to be bailed out, Pitney Bowes is half its market value from 2001, and several are average. Only two still stand as "great" by Collins standards today, Nucor, a steel producer, and Phillip Morris, the tobacco company. Greatness by his definition is difficult to sustain.

Micah and Jesus take greatness into a different direction. It is moved out of the performance column. Greatness has to do with character, the kind of person that I am. It has to do with how God sees and defines me. Listen to Micah; "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Greatness is defined as goodness and the ethical, moral, and spiritual quality of my life.

The deepest ingrained cultural imperative I face every day is the work ethic and its equation of personal worth with productivity. Kat Duff, author of "The Alchemy of Illness" observes that everyone he knows who becomes ill feels guilty at times for "not doing anything". The worst thing that could befall me would not to "be productive". Or so I am conditioned to think (Homiletics quoting from Duff, p, 41).

Micah and Jesus espouse values that don't commodify people. Rather, God is central and they embrace people as ends, not means. Because my neighbor is created in the image of God, it matters how I treat that neighbor. How do we as a church care for the people in our midst, our neighborhood, and city? Are we engaged in building up the quality of life, defending the rights of those Jesus calls blessed, the poor, materially and physically, those facing loss and mourn that loss, the meek who humbly live and are

easily trampled upon, and coming alongside those who are spiritually searching for God and right living? What we do and how we interact with others reflects how we treat God.

In my pursuit of greatness, as the social environment I live in defines it, is it possible to miss what God calls good and judge what God calls blessed? May, in my pursuits, I fail to pay attention to God and forget the spiritual disciplines of worship, bible study, prayer, service, and learning to discern the voice of God? Can I be good without embracing God's goodness? Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "Beware what you set your heart upon. For it shall surely be yours" (Homiletics, p.41). Let's take a brief look at the Beatitudes in this light.

The first four Beatitudes are called the 'passive beatitudes'. These are the people in need whom God blesses. Jesus blesses empty people, victims of life who, in the world's opinion and often in their own eyes, do not measure up. They are the ones who appear to be ignored and condemned by God. They are the ones we often call losers, broken people, the underclass and wretched of the earth. We might picture those who exploit and take advantage of this population group, standing in the crowd, listening to Jesus bless them, crying "Wrong!"

Then there is another group of people who are blessed. They make up the doers, known as the 'active beatitudes'. These are the people serving, reaching out to the world in imitation of Jesus, offering the world heart, purity, and peace. This is the church, the body of Christ, at its best in the world.

The last two are blessed by Jesus for bringing his message into a resistant world. They are persecuted for doing so, as Jesus was. These are the 'hurt beatitudes'. The sequence of blessings flows to those who have been knocked down by life. God picks them up and sends them into the world to pick others up, knowing they will be knocked down, get up again, be knocked down, and get up again. This is exercising what we call the aerobics of discipleship (Bruner, Matthew, p.156). But all are blessed by God.

Our opening questions lead us back to ourselves and the kind of persons that we are becoming. In an enlightening book, "The Patient Ferment of the Church", Alan Kreider, the author, looks at the rapid growth of the early church. He asked what caused such growth during a period that the church was underground and often persecuted. Was it the result of grand outreach strategies, superior preaching and leadership, Collin's definition of greatness, 'distinctive impact', 'superior performance', and 'level five leaders', all of the things that we so highly value?

What he discovered was the character value of patient faithfulness. The Christian community spent up to three years examining people before admitting them to membership. The people were being trained in discipleship and faithfulness, the goal being to represent the character of Christ. The focus was on growing people, not institutional, organizational greatness (Homiletics, p.39).

"With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?" The measurement for greatness in God's eye lies in responding to these questions, both as individuals and a church, perhaps even a nation: Are we doing justice and seeking the will of God in all we do? Is faithfulness and living out the covenant made in baptism being lived out? Are we living into the 'blessings' of Jesus articulated in the Beatitudes? Are we walking humbly with God, paying attention to what God is doing around us?