

“Faithful Generations”

October 23, 2022

Scripture: Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 7:1-12

As I’ve thought about our celebration today and the 175 years of ministry North has enjoyed, I tried to think what readings would best capture our ethos. Which ones seem to express our deepest values as a faith community. These two, I think, fit the bill really well. “Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly” describes us when we’re at our best. Not just us here at North, but all of God’s people throughout history.

In Micah’s day the people were wracked with fear. They saw on the horizon, to the west, the threat of ruin coming in the form of a great military power in Assyria. Speaking in their voice, the prophet asks what God needs from them to stop it. Are there certain animals they can sacrifice, certain prayers they can say that will appease God and motivate God to save them? But the answer has nothing to do with pious gestures or acts of contrition. God’s answer is to call them to a deeper way of living with one another and with the world.

To do justice means to put aside privilege and the need for status, so that those who might be overlooked are given the attention they deserve, are treated with dignity and respect. Loving kindness, the word in Hebrew is *hesed*, means to look with compassion on others and see in them the same hopes and dreams we carry within ourselves, to recognize our connection with them no matter how different our backgrounds or circumstances might be. And of course walking humbly is to realize we don’t have all the answers, we make mistakes, we follow destructive paths at times that require our willingness to confess and repent and make things right.

These are some of the core values that our congregation has embraced over the generations. That doesn’t mean we’ve always lived up to them; there are times when we’ve fallen short, but the hope is we’ve been able to look at ourselves critically and identified what needs to be changed or confessed. For instance, back in the late 1870’s and early 1880’s our church was involved in the pipeline that removed Native American men and boys from their homes and communities to relocate them in government run schools in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and Hampton, Virginia. Just last week some of us learned about the effect of these schools on the folks who attended them, how it cut them off from their heritage and plunged many of them into an unending cycle of trauma that was often passed on to later generations. Those schools did terrible damage. Knowing that our congregation was in some way a part of that is a bitter pill to swallow.

I don’t think we were involved out of malice. I think the Reverend Hubble at the time truly believed this was the best thing to do for Native people, the loving thing. But he was wrong. And our forebears were wrong to believe that robbing a people of their culture and forcing them to adopt another wouldn’t do tremendous harm. Today we see the effect of those actions and we’re aware of our complicity. So, now we can repent. In all humility we can confess on behalf of our forebears and do what’s needed to help make things right.

When Jesus teaches, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” I don’t think he means we should never evaluate others’ actions. We have to do that if we’re going to be accountable for ourselves and hold others accountable. What I think he’s referring to is the attitude we bring to our judgment. If we look on others as inferior, whether now or in the past, then our judgment is already compromised. But if we pass judgment on others’ actions while realizing we share in their behavior, then we’re holding one another accountable. Jesus seems more interested in eliminating arrogance than eliminating judgment.

That’s another value I think lies at the heart of our congregation. Over the generations we have learned that at times things need to change, that we’re not on the path we should be if we want to do the most good. The move from Main and Chippewa, where our first building was located, was made mostly out of a need for more viable space. A beautiful building was constructed at Delaware and Utica where we were located from 1906 to about 1952. But over time our capacity to reach out to the neighborhood diminished. We were reaching fewer and fewer people, while also sharing space with several other Presbyterian churches in the vicinity. Making the decision to move to the northern suburbs must have been wrenching for some. It takes a lot of humility for a congregation to decide it can no longer succeed where it is and move many miles away to essentially start over from scratch.

But that’s what North did. That kind of risk is part of our heritage and speaks to our willingness to look at ourselves critically, as Jesus encourages his disciples. And we’ve been in this location longer than we were in either of the other two. Over those years we’ve faced many challenges, usually with grace and good humor, but sometimes not. We make mistakes and try to learn from them. And we recognize that we are in process of becoming, though never fully, the people God calls us to be. So, today we give thanks for where we’ve been as a congregation. We look back on a history that has shaped us and helped us to grow. We can learn from our forebears in this place, continue their good work while trying to avoid their mistakes. Like the generations before us we strive to be faithful in our generation. Faithful to the call God makes of us in this time, in this place.

That’s what God asks of us. We’re not here to be perfect; as the great Desmond Tutu once said, “the Church isn’t called to be perfect; we’re called to be faithful.” And that it is how we will continue to live. As we honor this legacy we’ve received, we commit ourselves to be faithful. We commit ourselves to make every effort to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly. We commit ourselves to see in those around us the image of God and let go of arrogance as we seek to improve ourselves rather than focusing on faults we perceive in others. And we commit ourselves to the principle of doing for others what we would have done for us. We are God’s own in this place, Christ’s faithful disciples. As we move forward in hope, may we seek God’s continuing guidance as we pave the road ahead for faithful generations to come.

Amen