

"Community"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 29, 2023

PLEASE READ:

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Dr. Andrew Gerber, the new President and Medical Director of *Silverhill Hospital* recently spoke to the Exchange Club about some of the new programs at Silverhill, and something he said almost as an aside shook me. He said pharmaceuticals have become substitutes for relationships that for centuries have been central to the healing work of churches. It reminded me of an interview with Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois, Dr. Hobart Mowrer, by John Stott, one of my mentors. Dr. Mowrer said he had 'a lover's quarrel with the church'. The church failed him when he was a teenager and continued to fail his patients. "How so?" Stott asked. "Because" he replied, "*the church has never learned the secret of community.*"

Today, I invite you to consider, *what is community?* Our English word comes from the Latin *Communitas* which is derived from *con* (meaning with) and *mūnus* (meaning "service; burden, duty, or obligation"). The most common definition of community is a group of people brought together by a common sense of duty or service. But I rather prefer the more subtle "burden." A group of people brought together by a sense of "*burden.*" The quality of any community is then going to depend on with whom they empathize, or what weighs heavily on their hearts.

Both texts read for us from Micah and Matthew shed light on the vision of community God intends and might help us to reflect on our life together as the community of the First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan.

Looking at the first lesson, it is clear Micah was deeply empathetic to the injustices and emptiness of the political and religious rituals of his day, the emphasis in tradition and purity laws which produced a "community" of hierarchy and prejudice (more about duties and obligations). Micah saw those who considered themselves to be holy in God's eyes (the keeper of the rules) to be perpetuators, if not the creators, of a community of hypocrisy, exclusion and alienation, a social system which produced *insiders* and *outsiders*.

The Lord spoke through Micah to remind people of God's saving acts, "I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery..." But the people focused on the empty practices of religious holiness, at the expense of relational kindness. Micah ponders for us, "With what shall I come before the

LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands, or rivers of oil? ... 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?*"

Prejudice, harshness, and arrogance were the characteristics of the religious community. I wonder if there is an analogy with people who blindly support law enforcement? The Memphis police have arrested the five officers who brutally beat Tyre Nichols. Police are supposed to be the good guys, the "community officers" who "keep the peace." Mary reminded me that the video of this brutal murder was released on Holocaust memorial day. How easy it is for good people to passively allow evil slowly take over a society before it is too late. And while I believe we have a good police department here in New Canaan, there are too many communities where police are the bad guys, perpetrators of racial injustice, discrimination, and violence, with little or no accountability.

Justice, kindness, and humility before God was Micah's vision of community. Justice is aligning our power with God's heart. Kindness can also be translated here as mercy or compassion. And humility. That's a tricky one, isn't it... Mark Twain once quipped, "Never be haughty to the humble, never be humble to the haughty." A rabbi explained this could also be translated, "in the way of God."

The emphasis of Micah's vision for God's people is more sharply focused in Jesus' Beatitudes. Even the people Jesus was addressing emphasizes the message itself. Jesus was motivated to present an alternative vision for community when *he saw the crowds*. The term "crowd" described the common, nameless people who would never have any special place in the halls of fame, power, or prestige. "The crowd" is New Testament code language for those typically on the fringe of the mainstream, the outcasts and untouchables of society.

After seeing the crowds, Jesus teaches his disciples about who is included in God's community, those who are welcome in God's company. Each verse of Jesus' vision of community begins with "Blessed." "Blessed" is a term (*markarioi* in the Greek) which simply means "affirmed by God." The religious leaders of Jesus day taught that those who kept the outer ritual practices of the law would experience success and happiness. For them, success and happiness on the outside meant that you were affirmed by God.

Jesus turns this whole system upside down with the strange assertion: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." This phrase is recorded only as "poor" in Luke, but either way it is offensive to our sensibilities. I wonder how many people would show up to a success seminar entitled, "How to become poor in spirit fast!" Perhaps this phrase could be translated as "Blessed are those who know their own insufficiency and know their need for God." This particular word for poor in the Greek carries the connotation of a beggar. Just as the beggar cannot depend upon his self-sufficiency to meet the needs that he has for living, so each person, if he or she is to have an authentic expression of God in their lives, must acknowledge their poverty of spirit apart from the presence of God. An experience of the presence of God is not something which we can acquire or work for - it is not something we can achieve, but that which we can only receive from God's gracious hand.

The vision of community here focuses on the fact that God's affirming love is for anyone who simply acknowledges their need. We begin to realize authentic community when we have been broken and poured out. Then we are able to turn and receive God's love and forgiveness for us. Then we are freer to share the burden and show unconditional love and acceptance for those who are hurting or in need around us.

Jesus describes what his community should be like in unexpected terms... His realm is inclusive and welcoming to those poor in spirit, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and mourners. They shall form a community where those who are hurting can come and find understanding, comfort, satisfaction, and the blessing of the full inheritance of life with God. His community is where we find the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers and those persecuted for the sake of justice and righteousness. They will give and receive mercy, be called God's children, and see God face to face!

Entrance into the community of our Lord is not for the proud or those who think they are worthy, but for those who confess their emptiness and who are open to a real change on the inside. The entrance requirements are so simple, yet so totally unacceptable to the proud and self-sufficient: I must acknowledge my lack, accept God's forgiveness and acceptance, trust Christ as my Savior, and follow my Lord not with empty religious ritual, but in doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly as he leads.

Perhaps we need to be poor in Spirit before we can really understand and care about anyone else? Perhaps then we can relate to another person's emptiness and pain and truly care for them with kindness and compassion?

I'm haunted by the apparent suicide this week of Dale Cheney, a 46-year-old husband and father. I didn't know him, but he seemed to have a stellar New Canaan profile: Harvard Business School, Goldman Sachs, founder of his own company T-Street Capital. But obviously something was very wrong with what was going on in his life. As we talked about last week, healing almost always requires community. We all need a community who can remind you that no matter how bad it is, you are loved and of infinite value in the eyes of God.

Perhaps when we recognize "there but for the grace of God go I" we can welcome people around us to be a part of the community of faith? Perhaps when we can share that point of our deepest pain we can truly give and receive God's healing love? There is such a need. We just don't know what people are really going through all around us...

We come together into this community through baptism and confirmation. We show up each Sunday because we have recognized our need and devoted our lives to Christ. As Bonhoeffer said well, "Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, but spiritual love loves the person for Christ's sake."¹ It's been said the church is the only organization in the world where it exists as much for its non-members as it does for its members. It is Christ's love which forgives, which comforts, which speaks the truth, which hungers and thirsts for justice and righteousness. And it is Christ's wonderful love that we can share as a tangible sign of God's kingdom blessing breaking into our world.

Nadia Bolz-Weber says about the Beatitudes that Jesus is not *describing* a blessing in these verses. He is *performing* a blessing! Jesus, you see, wants each of us to know that we are blessed by God before we go out to bless the world...

Have you ever heard of the Harvard Professor named Robert Rosenthal, who in 1964 did a famous experiment at an elementary school south of San Francisco. He administered a normal IQ test but called it the "Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition." After the students took the test, he *randomly* selected a number of students and said the test predicted that *these* students would excel. And guess what? The students became what the teachers believed them to be.

What if the same is true about blessing? What if we start seeing all people as blessed by God and maybe that is exactly what they will become? I think it's difficult to

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*, p.34.

receive a blessing, perhaps because it is so rare. Blessed. We are called to receive the blessing of God, and to be the blessing of God for others.

And I'm not talking about describing a blessing. I'm talking about actually being a blessing. Isn't it interesting that giving a blessing is the first thing Jesus does before he starts his ministry here in the gospel according to Matthew? He blesses people who society would not consider blessed. "(Jesus) is demonstrating once again that God regularly and relentlessly shows up just where we least expect God to be in order to give to us freely what we can neither earn nor achieve: blessedness."²

What if blessing is really what this community is all about? What if we remembered that our primary role in the larger community is to be a blessing?

King talked about the Beloved Community. What if we were known as the blessed Community? Blessed to be a blessing. Always seeking to bless those who need a blessing. And who doesn't need a blessing?

Now, I don't expect us to do something like this if we've never practiced. So, we are going to practice it right here and now. Turn to a person near you, and mark the sign of the cross over them, and say to them, "God bless you and keep you."

See, I was right. You are worthy of blessing! And you are perfectly capable of being a blessing to others. That, my friends, is the secret of God's community!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

² David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3020>