

This We Believe: Seek
Micah 6.6-16
Pentecost +14
August 30, 2015
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we aspire to serve God by asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all.

The arrival of this weekend is no surprise. We knew 10 Augusts since the waters rose would be marked in some way. I have heard you say, "I am done talking about it" or "I just don't want to see the pictures again." By yesterday I even heard, "I am so ready for this weekend to be over."

Yet it seems that most everyone has marked the weekend in some way. It's not that we haven't wanted to name what has passed, but ways of acknowledging such an occasion have been varied. My friend Lisa and her family have intentionally visited all of their very favorite places in New Orleans for the past three days. They've eaten roast beef po'boys at Parkway, played in City Park and Audubon Park, and this morning ate beignets at Cafe du Monde before attending worship in the church where they were married.

On Friday morning, I stood beneath a giant live oak at my son's school as a remembering space opened up for just a few minutes. Then a faculty and parent band performed Walking To New Orleans as adults remembered and children, most of whom were born in the decade since Katrina, witnessed a powerful moment connected to the story they will grow up always knowing.

I met Carla one day when Tim and I were giving away doughnuts and coffee on our Kindness Corner. I have kept up with her since then, and she gave her time yesterday working on a wetlands restoration project. She spent the day in the mud with many other volunteers, and they planted 17,000 wetland plants to support that native ecosystem.

Avery Strada and I grew up together in Mobile, and she is now the volunteer coordinator for Habitat in New Orleans. Once our largest Community Partner here in this building, yesterday the good folks at Habitat marked 150,000 volunteers on New Orleans Area projects in the past decade.

There has been everything from neighborhood parades to yoga on the Holy Cross levee, art exhibits and memorial observances to free family days at the zoo, NOMA, and the children's museum. The City sponsored an official Citywide Day of Service encouraging volunteers to contribute to a range of community projects with a goal of 10,000 volunteers in a week. Yesterday was a remarkable day of service across the city.

It seems for many, remembering a time of great tragedy and grief has inspired action for the common good in the present day.

Of course there are even more stories and big and small rituals. We all face these anniversary dates in our own ways. The day a loved one died. The day a baby would have been born. The day the market crashed. The day he would have celebrated another birthday. The day we said goodbye. The day the city washed away. With a song, a favorite cup of tea, a certain item of clothing, a gesture or an intentional act, we acknowledge what has been, what never was, what has passed and is no longer. We can become overwhelmed by such remembering—lost in our grief, lost in nostalgia, lost in loss.

As I have thought of this weekend and this sermon, I have repeatedly come across a quote that is a blend of Micah 6 and at least two talmudic passages: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”¹

Today we consider what it means to be people, in all times and in all places, who are committed to serving God by seeking justice. If we are justice seeking people, then we are describing an action in the world, an awareness of self. And we must consider what it means to be people who profess a call to justice seeking in *this* particular city at *this* particular time.

Some people of faith are turned off by the language of seeking justice because they sense it is a term that replaces belief in God with social action. The fear is that seeking justice means instead of talking about Jesus, we talk about wildflowers and blue whales. Instead of looking toward the cross, we hug a tree. However, the truth is that justice seeking is an extension of talking about Jesus. And caring for wildflowers and whales and trees and the least of these is following the very path that led to Jesus’ cross.

In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans writes about the kingdom of God as “among us and beyond us, now and not-yet. It is the wheat growing in the midst of weeds, the yeast working its magic in the dough...It can come and go in the twinkling of an eye, Jesus said. *So pay attention; don’t miss it.*”

She continues, “There is nothing Jesus talked about more than the good news of this kingdom. He speaks of it more than a hundred times in the Gospels, and only mentions church twice. And yet as nearly every astute reader of Scripture will notice, the opposite is true in the book of Acts and especially in the Epistles where...the Greek word for *assembly* we translate into *church*—appears hundreds of times with direct

¹ Source unknown. Words adapted from The Talmud and Micah 6.8

references to the kingdom all but absent. Wilhelm Dilthey put it rather starkly: 'Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, but what appeared was the church.'²

Jesus described a way of engaging the world that brought about awareness of a separate reality. The stuff of heaven, the stuff of God, is already around us right here and is wrapped up in the ways we treat our neighbors. As he dined with people the religious insiders deemed outsiders, he was seeking justice. As he lowered himself to the place of a servant and washed the feet of his followers, he was getting at the idea of some other reality and order of things; the mysterious ways of God. When he healed and restored and returned outsiders to the fullness of community, he was showing us that the kingdom of God is like *this*—this way of doing, walking, loving, welcoming.

Between his lessons with the disciples and the writings of Paul, an organization was forming. Even when people thought he might be coming back for them soon, there was an institutional structure developing. Quickly there were insiders and outsiders, and Paul wrote to address those wrong practices. We do this by our nature. We take the kingdom of God and slap some bylaws on it and have a vote about how seriously we'll take Jesus' instructions. What should be metaphor, we make law. What should be law, we make metaphor.

But this problem isn't new to us. And it wasn't new to the early church. We read from a beloved passage in Micah this morning, and the people of God are asking what is required of them to fully be people of faith. They are the religious insiders, they are the devout ones. They want to know what they are supposed to DO about the things they BELIEVE. And their questions are wrapped up in worship. Just like us, their temptation was to gather what was meant to be about a way of living and being in the world and pack it up tightly to leave and observe in the small space of corporate worship.

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim writes of this text, "One is given to wonder about the expectations of God for the community or, more accurately, the people's understandings of those expectations. Were all of these suggestions serious?...The basic issue at stake in your relationship with God is not the nature of your worship (see Amos 5:21-24).

At the same time, what people do in response to their God is not irrelevant. 'What is good?' is an important question, a question that God has already answered: 'he has told you' (6:8; see Hosea 12:6). What is most basic in this relationship with God? What does the Lord require of 'you': to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with 'your' God. What does the Lord require of you, you who have been 'saved' by God? The issue is not a means to achieve salvation. The question addresses those who are members of the community of faith already. Does the relationship you have with God entail any expectations? This text says: Yes.

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pp. 252-253

The orientation toward *both* neighbor and God is clear. In effect, give yourself on behalf of others, particularly those who are needy, by doing justice and loving kindness ('steadfast love'). At the same time, walk humbly (or attentively) with your God. The 'walk' with God (4:2; see Deuteronomy 26:17; 28:9) has to do with life's journey and the shape thereof. That God's call for action on behalf of the less fortunate is joined with the call to journey with God is important; the one will deeply affect the other. ³

To be justice seeking people means we are people who live and love in such a way that we are pursuing the kingdom of God in all facets of our lives. This is not beating a drum about divisive issues. This is looking at all of the world as holy. This is acknowledging that the kingdom of God is beyond us and among us, so we best pay attention.

We cannot address all matters of justice seeking in one hour of worship. In part, this is what our Mission Action Committee is calling us to consider with a new emphasis every year. Together with our Associate Pastor for Community Engagement, they are finding ways to invite us all to follow Jesus beyond this hour of worship.

In September, we will participate in our second-annual CROP Hunger Walk as we look at the reality of global hunger, and this year we get to be the hosts of this event. Part fundraiser, part prayer walk, part public awareness rally, the CROP Walk turns our attention to the poorest in our world who never have the abundance that we take for granted every day. Awareness leads us to ask "why do they never have enough?" Asking why leads us to consider global systems that benefit some while neglecting others. Learning about those systems should horrify and offend us and lead us to wanting to address and even dismantle systems. This is what justice seeking is about. Each layer leads to another, and we enter a journey that is seeking the very kingdom of God as we pursue a just world for all people.

In October, we will roll out our first week of Food For Thought with the Audubon Charter School just three blocks down Broadway. After Katrina, the New Orleans school system became 100% charter with an open application process for all Orleans Parish residents. That means the old system of neighborhood schools really is no more. My daughter's school in Bayou St. John is made up of kids from the West Bank, Gentilly, Uptown, Mid City, and the Lower 9th Ward. It is a beautiful challenge to welcome a diversity of students to classrooms in both new charter schools and more established schools like Audubon. One of those challenges is seeking academic equity when there are students who do not have enough food to eat over the weekend. This group of students is starting Monday at a disadvantage because their bodies have suffered all weekend which means their brains do not have what is required to start fresh each week. Naturally, there is a cumulative effect of such nutritional deficiency, and that's where we come in as we work with the school to identify students who are most in need of weekend food to prepare them for school on Monday.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1859

Once we are aware of the need and understand how the need is present at Audubon Charter, then we begin to ask how is this need present in New Orleans? In the United States? In 2015? And once we ask how and why, we begin to look at structures and systems that allow small children to go hungry on a Saturday in one part of town while my well-fed children play soccer beside the River in another.

And once we understand some things about poverty and hunger and racism and income disparity and violence and crime...you see, the layers continue. We are seeking the way of Jesus, we are noticing God's presence in all things and all people, we are aspiring to serve God by asking these good questions, and in doing so we simply must become justice seekers. Our questions inform our action. Our faith informs our life.

We're just scratching the surface here. Mission Action is guiding us through Matthew 25 over the next few years: I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[g] you did it to me.'

Among us and beyond us, the kingdom of God is near. Pay attention. Notice. Ask. Act.

Our asking and seeking will lead us to consider clean water and rising water, global poverty and local poverty, prison reality and prison reform. We will have new questions to ask. We will have new layers to peel back and explore. We will have new actions to take on as we continue the decades-old legacy here at St. Charles of being people who take seriously the way of seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. This is the way of Jesus and this we believe.