

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31
Matthew 5: 1-12
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
January 30, 2011

On this day when we ordain and install Elders and Deacons, three texts commend themselves for our reflection. The first comes from the prophet Micah which we read for the Call to Worship.

He has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

Do. Love. Walk. Three active verbs. There is nothing here about spiritual superiority. There is nothing about believing the right things. Most importantly there is nothing about *talking*. We are to *do* justice; that is, to practice God's values in our daily lives. We are to *love* kindness; that is, seek as our highest aim to embody in our lives God's *hesed*—his tender mercy and compassion. Finally we are to walk *humbly...with our God*; that is, we are called walk at *God's* pace with patience and readiness. We are not to be rushing ahead or lagging behind. We are to be walking *with* God in the humble acceptance that God knows what God is doing.

Micah is not speaking to a spiritual elite. This requirement of God is for *all* of God's people. If you are not being ordained and installed this morning the words of God through Micah *still apply to you*. We do not elect Elders and Deacons to do our work *for* us. They are not our proxies. They serve to *facilitate* our ministries of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.

Yet if we actually seek to respond to God's call through Micah we will be leaving behind the familiar and secure world of accepted values and entering a Twilight Zone. The physical

world will not change; but our perspective *will* change. Indeed, we will come to realize that the world where God's will prevails is very different from the one we have been brought up to expect. We find ourselves seeing with new eyes; hearing with new ears; thinking new thoughts; spending our time in entirely different ways. Our priorities are profoundly reordered and life takes on an entirely new meaning.

Sounds great, right? Yet there is a cost to this new life. Many of our friends, family and colleagues will wonder what happened to us. They wonder when we will return to the "real" world.

And that is when we will do well to reflect on what the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians. In an effective use of what our English teachers called "irony" Paul tells us that the path we have elected to follow is "foolishness". No doubt this was the word used by Paul's critics. The Greek word translated here connotes the world view of someone who has lost contact with reality. Such a person is oblivious to how ridiculous he or she appears to the world of "oriented," "sane" and "well adjusted people." These people describe themselves as living in the "real" world.

So what is this foolishness? The most comprehensive description of foolishness come from the opening words to Jesus' most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for

theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

From the point of view of the wise of this world, by which I mean those who are secure and comfortable with their world view and also their social and economic position, Jesus' teaching is the very essence of foolishness. To begin with the Greek word translated "blessed" is *makarios* which means, "supremely happy and fortunate." Really! I read these words and find a list of every circumstance and condition I have been taught to avoid in my culture. Poverty, grief, meekness, being the object of persecution and rejection: I should seek these things out? This is the way to happiness? When I am persecuted and slandered I should give Jesus a "high five"? Really! No wonder philosophers like Nietzsche (whose thought helped undergird the world view of the Nazi's) rejected Christianity as a sentimental and dangerous indulgence of all that is weak.

And yet in our own American culture we hardly celebrate the qualities of the Beatitudes as virtues. We are much more impressed with self made women and men; rugged individualists; people who "make it" in the world. Oh, we venerate people like Mother Theresa; but when people profess those values among us we tend to tell them to live in the "real world." We see their ambition at best as misguided idealism and at worst an attempt to sabotage our way of life. How well I remember someone leading a wealth seminar saying, "If you want to be rich, observe the poor and do the opposite."

One of the most important characteristics of a Christian is that we actually *believe Jesus!* We reject the values of radical individualism. We reject the image of the self made woman or

man. We admire and seek to cultivate the qualities of humility, mercy and compassion. We affirm seeking the values and ideals of God's kingdom even more highly than those of our nation. We do not seek out persecution and rejection; but when and if it comes we are willing to suffer rather than deny the life and teachings of God expressed in Jesus Christ.

Most importantly we are meant to live out these values and this faith together. It is an often missed detail that when Jesus says "Blessed are *you...*" the "*you*" is *plural*. He is speaking to his disciples as a group. Why is this important? It is because it is impossible for any one individual to live the life of the Beatitudes alone. It can only be done in community. We are called to begin to live out Jesus' vision among ourselves and so becoming a sign of God's Kingdom in this small yet important place. And we are meant to live this life in the world around us beginning with our families, friends, neighbors and colleagues and including the stranger who is most clearly the presence of Jesus in our midst.

To live this life; to become this kind of community will result in the fulfillment of God's words to Israel through Micah: to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

It is exactly the foolishness we are called to. It is the path our Elders and Deacons are called to lead us in, and we to follow. Amen.