

“A More Perfect Union”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
July 6, 2008  
Scripture: Micah 6:1-8

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States begins with these words.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Last week I mentioned that one of our neighbors approached me while I was having a meeting on our front steps. “Is your church,” she asked – “are Presbyterians the democratic church?” It is not an exact fit, but I knew what she meant. “Yes,” I said, “we govern ourselves much like the American political system, with representatives elected to make decisions.” On this Sunday, on a long Fourth of July weekend, I want us to reflect on some key principles that we hold dear.

There is a foundational principle in democratic systems that tolerates, even requires self-criticism, for improvement. In the Preamble, the words “in order to form a more perfect Union.” In the Presbyterian Book of Order, the church affirms “Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,” that is, “The church reformed, always reforming,” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

In these foundational principles, there is expressed a duty to work for the betterment of both the country and the church. We cannot rest comfortable with imperfections and exceptions in how our country acts and rules. We cannot tolerate imperfections with the excuse that we are not in charge, for we live in a democracy. Few though we may be, we are part of “we the people,” and we must do our part to continue to form a more perfect union. In the same way, in the Church, we cannot tolerate ancient prejudices enshrined as religious dogma. We cannot sit back and say injustices and oversights are the responsibility of someone else. We have the ability, and therefore the responsibility, to help the church reform according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

And yet, our ability and responsibility to work for improvements means that it is not easy to be in a democracy. Inevitably, things will be said and done that do not meet with our approval. Our conscience may be bruised by actions taken in our name. And try as we might, our efforts to change are met with resistance and failures. Yet we cannot give up, nor can we wash our hands of responsibility. As the poet Robert Frost once wrote,

And were an epitaph to be my story  
I'd have a short one ready for my own.

I would have written of me on my stone:  
I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

“A lover’s quarrel with the world.” I like that expression as to how we should relate to our country and to our church. To be able to disagree passionately. To work for change. To argue, strenuously. And yet to know that we are bound together in something bigger than our own beliefs and opinions. In our times, with divorce rates falling but still high, it is not a bad reminder that love can tolerate disagreements. That love - that passion - requires speaking boldly about our beliefs and emotions. Human relationships can withstand disagreements. And, I might add, our relationship with God can tolerate hearing our arguments and anger and deepest questions.

And it goes both ways. The Bible is full of passages that describe God’s frustrations and sadness and anger with humans. Called as partners to be God’s servants, we humans let God down over and over. In our Bible passage from the prophet Micah, we hear the story of God having a lover’s quarrel with the world. The story is set as if it is a court case. The mountains and hills serve as the judge and jury, and God pleads God’s case. For Yahweh has a controversy with his people. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” God cries out. (Micah 6:3)

The problem, the controversy, in God’s eyes is that the people have forgotten what God has done for them. And the people have forgotten God’s ways. They come to worship still, but for the wrong reasons. They make their offerings, burnt-offerings of precious animals and offerings of expensive oils. They bring their children to the temple and dedicate them to God. But it appears that they think these offerings are enough. Offerings as some kind of bribe. Large ostentatious gifts and acts designed to please God, while the rest of life continued as though God did not matter. Is that what a life of faith is all about. Absolutely not, says the prophet Micah.

God 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? (Micah 6:8)

This one verse served as the theme for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church this year. As issues of purpose and mission and priorities were debated and discussed, this verse, with its call to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God served as a challenge and a reminder. Like the words, “in order to form a more perfect union,” and “the church reformed, always reforming,” these words from the prophet Micah direct our involvement in reforming the church, our society and all aspects of our lives.

These three commandments, these three attributes are to go together: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. They are like three legs of a stool. They are all needed. Ignore and eliminate one and the chair tips over.

Do justice  
Love kindness

## Walk humbly with your God

All three are needed for the life of faith. We have known people who have an incredible zeal for justice. Prophetic, passionate, and probably right. But sometimes people like this can get so caught up in their crusade that they think others are not as pure as they are. And they act with little kindness to others and have no humility towards those who may disagree. Not enough. Do justice **and** love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

We have known other people who are incredibly kind. Compassionate, and always willing to volunteer to help those in need. But sometimes people like this think their kind volunteer efforts are enough. They cannot see that some problems are the result of long-lasting injustices that must be confronted and changed. Random acts of kindness are not always enough. Do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

And we have known those with incredible humility. Good people who would never trumpet their own accomplishments or desire the limelight. But sometimes justice or kindness requires a person to do something that will gain attention. Just being humble is not enough.

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice **and** love kindness **and** walk humbly with your God. All three are needed, and are too often in short supply in our world.

Our congregation supports a local faith-based group called MICAHA (named after the prophet in our reading). MICAHA stands for Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing. A MICAHA organizer for our area alerted me to a series of newspaper articles appearing in the Pioneer Press on affordable housing. I was shocked and deeply discouraged by the tenor of comments on the articles by readers. Name-calling and lack of civility were common. And many of those commenting had no concern that housing – safe, clean, affordable housing is a matter of justice. Here is one typical comment on the article, “The War Over Affordable Housing.”

Shirley - your comment reflects some fundamental misunderstanding.

The answer to the question "Doesn't everyone deserve a reasonable life?" is actually No. I don't say that out any kind of animosity for my fellow human beings. I say it because it is simply true.<sup>2</sup>

What would the prophet Micah say?

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? (Micah 6:8)

In our polarized times, too many people have embraced a win at all costs mentality. Do what it takes to ensure that your side prevails – no trick is too dirty for life is a zero-sum game and the ends justify the means. In our culture's practices, we have come to embrace that line made famous by Malcolm X: It seems that we have all come to believe that it is right to do what it takes to win, by whatever means necessary.

Where is our civility? Where is our sense of humility? Another fundamental principle of the Presbyterian book of order is respecting differences of opinion and belief. “We also believe [the Book of Order states] that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.”<sup>3</sup> Justice can be done with a humility towards others and a kindness to all. We can work for change, for improvement, for reform without resorting to name-calling or meanness.

On this Fourth of July weekend, as we engage in a lovers’ quarrel with our country to help create a more perfect union, I think we need to keep this passage from Micah in mind. Clearly our union is not perfect. Polls show that a majority of Americans feel that the country is on the wrong track. Clearly change, of some sort, is needed. Democracy insists that we as individual citizens must do our part to make change.

Here in St. Paul, as the host city for the Republican National Convention, we have a unique opportunity to approach democracy as active participants. I was very pleased by the tenor as well as decisions reached by our Session about the role Central will play as a church in close proximity to the convention. During those four days, we have decided to offer our regular Wednesday community lunch each day of the convention to encourage hospitality and healthy meals. We have partnered with a group who were referred to us by the Department of Homeland Security to use our sanctuary as a place of prayer and meditation – a Peaceful Presence. And we received requests from a variety of organizations from across the political spectrum. That we would receive requests from such a variety of organizations struck me as a good thing. And I was pleased by the debate as well as the decision to agree to use our space for both a forum sponsored by the Network of Spiritual Progressives and for a worship service for the Texas and Louisiana delegations. During those four days, when the eyes of the world will be on our city, I believe we will be very active and engaged and “in the city for good.”

On this day, we are reminded that offerings and symbolic gestures are not enough to fulfill what God requires. We will do our part. We will work for justice. We will love kindness, even with those with whom we disagree – even, as Jesus urges, for our enemies. And we will do so not out of self-righteousness, but in a humble spirit. One last time:

God 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? (Micah 6:8)

May it be so for us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> G-2.0200

<sup>2</sup> Bob Shaw, “The War Over Affordable Housing” The Pioneer Press, 29 June, 1998. Article and comments can be found at [http://www.twincities.com/ci\\_9727864?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.twincities.com/ci_9727864?nclick_check=1).

<sup>3</sup> G-1.0305