

Micah 6:1-8 ~ 1 Corinthian 1: (10-17), 18-31

Walk Humbly

February 2, 2020 ~ 4th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

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Introduction to Scripture:

We are about to receive another dose of “righteous anger.” Another round of controversies abounding within a faith community. This time, it’s not God shouting at Judah through the voice of the prophet Micah. This time it’s Paul writing to the church in Corinth and boy is he ticked off. It’s a good thing they didn’t have Twitter back then. Some of this may have been unreadable in church. To help get us dialed in to Paul’s hot and bothered mood, I am going to back up to verse 10, just hitting the highlights. Warning: their issues back almost 21 centuries ago, (in about 54 CE), may sound quite contemporary.

Communion Meditation:

“Walk humbly.” That’s probably not the play that either 49er’s Quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo or Kansas City Chiefs’ Quarterback Patrick Mahomes will be calling in their opening huddles at tonight’s Super Bowl. “Walk humbly” to make the touch down? Foolishness. If you want to win a football game.

“Walk humbly” aka “Bend the Knee” in the Game of Thrones drama series, became fighting words in the fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. In the final season, when Queen Daenerys I Targaryen demanded that Jon Snow of Winterfell from the North, “Bend the Knee” another war almost broke out on the spot. Back here in the real world of the NFL, when Colin Kaepernick decided to “take a knee” during the national anthem, his move awakened and angered football fans, across the land. His decision to kneel was intended as a political act to shine a light racial injustice. And ultimately, it cost him his job.

No one in the status-driven Roman Empire, where competition for honor was the main game, could have seen walking humbly as a winning move. Particularly in the city of Corinth which was famous for social-ladder climbing wannabes. In the days of Jesus, boasting was the way of Rome and the currency of the culture of Corinth. Paul had his work cut out for him. Paul’s harangue in this letter was taking aim at the divided, status conscious, boastful people in the church in Corinth. Things inside the church had gotten severely contentious, very quickly.

Did you ever notice how we humans can make *anything* into a competition when we forget to get off our high horse? Thanks to Paul’s letters we know that the church in Corinth had managed to take the rite of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and spiritual gifts and turn all of them into flash points for competition and rivalry. They used baptism to delineate factions, “I was baptized by Paul, *you* were only baptized by Apollos.” They found a way to make the Lord’s Supper be about class distinctions, “those slaves are always so late to worship, let’s just go ahead and have the Lord’s supper without them.” Spiritual gifts also quickly became something to boast and brag about.

The “message of the cross” has been turning the message of the world on its head since resurrection day. The essence of that message goes right back to Micah: self-emptying, kenotic living is what powers our ability to love kindness and to do justice. It starts with walking humbly, which goes right to the heart of the greatest and first commandments to love God and neighbor. Micah’s message is explicitly personal. It is addressed to the reader. “He has told you, O Mortal”. It’s not about what you bring to the potluck. (“How about a whole mess of rams? Or a crazy amount of oil—will that do it for you, Lord?”) It’s not about the things you bring, it’s about who and what we care about, and where we see ourselves in the picture. It hinges on our perspective. And that means getting off our high horse of self-importance.

As Gerald Hughes has written in the quote on your bulletin cover: “Walk humbly before your God. Humility derives from the Latin word “humus” meaning the earth. Humility is about seeing the truth of things, seeing ourselves in perspective, so that we are no longer the center of the universe, but an element in its dance, with God as the choreographer.”ⁱ

This goes for us as individuals and for us as a church. Being a faith community together, shaped by the Holy Spirit, helps us get out of dead center and into the light of a more divine perspective. I will break this down for us a bit. Let’s take the ability to see ourselves in perspective timewise and our spot in history. How will what we do or don’t do now, effect the 7th generation after us? **Our time** on earth is so very short, if you think about it. Let’s not throw disregard out history or our future generations. **Our place** on earth is tiny: we live in one town, in one state, in one country, on one of seven continents. How often do we consider how our actions or inaction affects our global neighbors? **Our gender** identity and our particular sexual orientation are not the only ones that God has created, or blessed. **Our cultural heritage**, skews our perspective as well. **Our politics**, whatever party or side we are on--is not the only perspective that matters or has something to contribute. Nor is **our faith tradition** the only vehicle for God’s grace and truth. You get the point. The take away is this: If we take the call to “walk humbly” as our marching order from God, our hearts can be opened beyond the built-in biases of our limited perspective. With our hearts turned toward God, whose heart encompasses all people and all creation, we can develop the ability to expand our perspective.

Doing justice and loving kindness depend upon a deep and abiding commitment to walking humbly with God, for Christ’s sake. As Christians, the cross is shorthand for how we can hope to do this. The cross reminds and compels us to acknowledge: it’s about self-emptying love, chosen and freely given. Every day and some days, every hour. It takes work, courage, and readiness. Perhaps even *more* courage than wielding a sword in a flashy duel, or moving a ball down a football field. Walking humbly is not for the feint of heart.

A striking real-life example occurred and was documented by eye witnesses on the ship named Dorchester on the evening of Feb. 2, 1943—exactly 77 years ago today, during World War II. The story goes like this: *the U.S.A.T. Dorchester was crowded to capacity, carrying 902 service men, merchant seamen and civilian workers...The Dorchester, one of three ships in the SG-19 convoy, was moving steadily across the icy waters from Newfoundland toward an American base in Greenland.*

Hans J. Danielsen, the ship's captain, was concerned and cautious. Earlier the Tampa had detected a submarine with its sonar. Danielsen knew he was in dangerous waters even before he got the alarming information. German U-boats were constantly prowling these vital sea lanes, and several ships had already been blasted and sunk. The Dorchester was now only 150 miles from its destination, but the captain ordered the men to sleep in their clothing and keep life jackets on. Many soldiers sleeping deep in the ship's hold disregarded the order because of the engine's heat. Others ignored it because the life jackets were uncomfortable.

On Feb. 3, at 12:55 a.m., a periscope broke the chilly Atlantic waters. Through the cross hairs, an officer aboard the German submarine U-223 spotted the Dorchester. The U-223 approached the convoy on the surface, and ... he gave orders to fire the torpedoes. The one that hit was decisive—and deadly—striking the starboard side, amid ship, far below the water line. Captain Danielsen, alerted that the Dorchester was taking water rapidly and sinking, gave the order to abandon ship. In less than 20 minutes, the Dorchester would slip beneath the Atlantic's icy waters. Tragically, the hit had knocked out power and radio contact with the three escort ships.

Aboard the Dorchester, panic and chaos had set in. The blast had killed scores of men, and many more were seriously wounded. Others, stunned by the explosion were groping in the darkness. Those sleeping without clothing rushed topside where they were confronted first by a blast of icy Arctic air and then by the knowledge that death awaited. Men jumped from the ship into lifeboats, over-crowding them to the point of capsizing, according to eyewitnesses. Other rafts, tossed into the Atlantic, drifted away before soldiers could get in them.

Through the pandemonium, according to those present, four Army chaplains brought hope in despair and light in darkness. Those chaplains were Lt. George L. Fox, Methodist; Lt. Alexander D. Goode, Jewish; Lt. John P. Washington, Roman Catholic; and Lt. Clark V. Poling, Dutch Reformed. Quickly and quietly, the four chaplains spread out among the soldiers. There they tried to calm the frightened, tend the wounded and guide the disoriented toward safety. "Witnesses of that terrible night remember hearing the four men offer prayers for the dying and encouragement for those who would live," says Wyatt R. Fox, son of Reverend Fox.

One witness, Private William B. Bednar, found himself floating in oil-smeared water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. "I could hear men crying, pleading, praying," Bednar recalls. "I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going." Another sailor, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, tried to reenter his cabin but Rabbi Goode stopped him. Mahoney, concerned about the cold Arctic air, explained he had forgotten his gloves. "Never mind," Goode responded. "I have two pairs." The rabbi then gave the petty officer his own gloves. In retrospect, Mahoney realized that Rabbi Goode was not conveniently carrying two pairs of gloves, and that the rabbi had decided not to leave the Dorchester.

By this time, most of the men were topside, and the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. It was then that Engineer Grady Clark witnessed an astonishing sight. When there were no more lifejackets in the storage room, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did the

Reverends Fox and Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line. As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains—arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers. Of the 902 men aboard the U.S.A.T. Dorchester, 672 died, leaving 230 survivors. When the news reached American shores, the nation was stunned by the magnitude of the tragedy and heroic conduct of the four chaplains.ⁱⁱ

That night, in those icy waters, Reverend Fox, Rabbi Goode, Reverend Poling and Father Washington did what was good, what the Lord required. For them, walking humbly meant giving their lives to save the lives of some of those men aboard the sinking Dorchester. Although most of us may never see that kind of battle, there is another battle we fight every day. The battle of perspective and will. Thanks be to God that Jesus already fought that battle on the cross and won. The empty tomb tells us: Love wins. Love is the power that will bring divine justice to all of creation. Love that begins with getting off our high horse and walking humbly.

What about today and what about us? On this Super Bowl Sunday, this 77th anniversary of these chaplain's humble act of self-sacrifice, we are being called. Called to get off our high horse and get in step with Jesus. The humble walk happens one step at a time.

ⁱ Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Compassion* (London: CAFOD and Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), pp.53-54, as quoted in *Resources for Preaching & Worship, Year A*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2004), p. 61.

ⁱⁱ . <http://www.fourchaplains.org/the-saga-of-the-four-chaplains/>