

Sermon 10-13-2013 "Kingdom Vision" Micah 1:1-2, 2:1-10 Luke 17:11-19

*Children's time - Making a Thank-You card for God*

Years ago a Disciples of Christ pastor from Indiana, Barbara Blaisdell, told of an experience she had when her family moved to a little town in Iowa one summer. She was eight years old at the time. "That summer I found a friend named Johnny. Johnny was a sweet kid, a tow-head with a round face and an easy smile. I met him soon after we moved, and I liked him a lot because...he'd let me boss him around. Whenever we pitched our play-tent in the yard to play house, Johnny would be the kid and let me be the parent. When we pulled the old school desks out onto the back patio, I was the teacher and Johnny would obediently study every lesson I demanded of him. When we climbed into the haymow of the old barn in order to organize our secret club, I, of course, got to be club president - and to make all the rules for the club. I really liked Johnny. All my old friends from my old town would have demanded that we take turns being parent or teacher or president, but not John.

"I had a great summer with my friend John, who didn't whine, didn't complain, and who let me be what I wanted to be. Even his mother was sweet. At 4:00 every day, when every other mother in the neighborhood was kicking the kids outside to play so she could start supper, Johnny's mom seemed delighted to fix us a peanut butter and jam sandwich - and let us eat it in front of the television as we watched the cartoon club on Channel 6.

"With Johnny the summer passed quickly, and soon it was September --and with it came school. Now school in a new town can be a scary thing. That first morning was warm and my new dress itched as Johnny and I walked to school. I was nervous and sweaty, wondering how everything would be. I was glad to have John with me. Until ... until we got to the school yard and heard that first taunt: "Hey look, who's the new girl with the retard?!" I stared at Johnny in shock. I hadn't realized he was one of those. But there it was, plain as day. The panic and pleading in Johnny's eyes just proved it was true.

"I wish I could say that I stood my ground, that I held his hand and said, "Don't mind those kids Johnny, they will grow up someday." But I didn't. I look back and think, maybe I couldn't. To save my own status, I cut our association. "Who, him? I don't even know his name." And I went on into the dark coolness of the school building alone.

"I didn't see Johnny again, all day. The special education classes, as they were called then, were all held in trailers, separated from the main building by several hundred yards - as if they had to be quarantined, lest we catch what "they" had.

"When I walked home from school that day, I had to pass by Johnny's house. His mom was sweeping the front sidewalk. She just looked at me sadly. I looked at the ground. It was after 4:00. She asked me, "Want to come in for a peanut butter sandwich?" I blushed and shook my head no and ran home. I felt naked - like she could see right through me. I had discovered what it is to recognize my own sin." (from Blaisdell's sermon, "Feed My Sheep," 5-3-92 - altered some by FTE).

The pressures of life in this world can keep us from seeing or accepting our blessings. Concern for ourselves can blind us to the beauty and the needs of the others around us. Greed can close our ears

to God's cry for justice and prevent us from recognizing cries of pain. What we have can lose its value as it becomes caught up in its own self-centeredness or self preservation. It's no different today than it was for the folks in the time of Micah, just as it was in the time of Jesus, just as it has always been with people. In the face of this, God calls us to risk having kingdom vision: to see and to hear what God is offering us in life.

The prophet Micah spoke out at a time when Judah had been enjoying prosperity. The economy had grown. The leading economic indicators were favorable. And many folks, particularly landowners and real-estate developers, were doing very well. Even so, the time of prosperity was threatened. Judah was being besieged by larger kingdoms to the north and east. Because of this, people were scrambling to protect their acquisitions.

Into the midst of all the wheeling and dealing came Micah. He was from a small town southwest of Jerusalem, but he was articulate. To the wealthy inhabitants of Jerusalem Micah shouted that what they were doing was hurting the families and small farmers, the poor and the powerless.

The people of Jerusalem didn't like it when Micah said that God was going to punish them for their injustices. But Micah began to describe their lives, as though he knew them: "You lie awake at night, thinking up ways to profit from the economy. You scheme to take land from the powerless. And you get up at dawn to implement your schemes. ...But your little kingdoms will not stand, for God will not stand for such injustice!"

Micah was anything but popular in Jerusalem with this message! The power brokers of Jerusalem had become enslaved to a quest for power in the form of wealth, as if it were an end in itself. Micah called them to see a greater good and purpose for their efforts. "See yourself as part of God's plan, and you shall not fail. See yourself as God's steward and you will have all the security you need. Realize that what you have been given is God's gift to you." They told Micah not to preach such things, that everything was fine and that he was wrong. They didn't have ears to hear the truth of Micah's message, so they would not change their ways. They didn't repent, and so they ended up being largely subservient to the Assyrians and later were invaded by the Babylonians. They failed to hear, or see, what God had hoped they would.

In today's gospel lesson, ten lepers yelled out to Jesus, asking for mercy. As lepers, they had lost everything: their families, their social status. There was no cure for leprosy in those days, so lepers lived out their days unable to be with their families, unable to work, unable even to worship. They were required to stay away from others, and if they dared walk into an inhabited area, they had to call out a warning, "Unclean, unclean," so that everybody could avoid any contact with them. In the Jewish society, it was believed that a person contracted leprosy because of sin, so of course God was displeased with lepers. The leper, then, also believed himself or herself to be a miserable sinner, as evidenced by the disease. So these ten lepers cried out to this Jesus they had heard about: "Have mercy." Jesus told them to do something that, as lepers, they could not do until they were clean: go and show yourselves to the priest. All ten obeyed Jesus, even though they were not yet healed. As they acted on his command, they became clean. Their following of Jesus' instructions brought about the healing of their physical bodies.

But one of the lepers, who happened to be not a Jew but a despised Samaritan, saw something the others didn't. When he realized that he had been healed, he went back to Jesus and gave thanks and praise to God. Jesus asked about the others, who had not returned to thank him, and then told the man that his faith had made him whole. This former leper - a Samaritan - seemed to understand that thanking Jesus was the same as praising God.

The grateful leper "saw that he was healed." He recognized that he was blessed with healing. One reason for lack of gratitude is human failure to see how good God is to us. We pray "Give us this day our daily bread," but as we gobble down each day's bread we rarely even acknowledge that it is part of our relationship with God. We look at our overstuffed cupboards and complain, "I have nothing to fix for dinner." We fail to see our blessings.

Our lives are filled with blessings, no matter how difficult things may be for some of us today. Some of the most profound blessings, however, we may not even notice. The most basic of these is the reason we are here today: God's love for us poured out in the person of Jesus Christ. This blessing is one that won't fade away even if we turn our backs on God, even if we're in the midst of terrible illness, even if we find ourselves totally overwhelmed by the demands of job or lack of job, relationship, economics, or life itself. It always amazes me to hear some of the residents of a nursing home speak of God's blessings. I've never forgotten an old woman whose legs had been amputated, who had no family left, who was blind, who had lost just about everything a person can in life. She would hold my hand and tell me of the blessings God had poured into her life, and how thankful she was to have Jesus as her Savior. Peace and joy spilled out of her and filled anybody who would take the time to listen to her. True blessing - her blind eyes could see it. (pause)

A few weeks ago Woody and I went on our kayaking adventure. On the second day, they took us to a huge lake in Canada, but there was a problem: 20 mph sustained winds with 40 mph gusts. So they finally decided to put us in the water in the huge lake (it extends into Vermont) and have us immediately go left under a bridge to get into a sheltered marsh-like area. It was cold and I was scared as I was pushed down onto the water in the long sea kayak. Immediately I became more frightened as my paddling seemed totally ineffective – I was being pushed out into the lake and could not get my little craft to turn to the left at all!! I even tried backpaddling, but I still was heading out, not left. I yelled but nobody could hear me in all the wind. Finally I blew my panic whistle on my life jacket, and somebody came out to me. To my chagrin, that "someone" was my husband, who seemed to have good control over his craft. He told me to drop my rudder down. Well, nobody had taught us about rudders thus far, but Woody instructed me how to get the thing down, and suddenly I was not on a runaway kayak any more! I could make it turn and make it go where I needed it to go! I got to the sheltered area and we had some wonderful hours of paddling in calm waters!

It seems to me that our faith and our decisions to thank God are our "rudders" in this world of pressures and scary things. Let down your rudder, thank God that you even have life, and you will become able to better see what is important in life, what really matters to God (kingdom vision!) and to you. Give thanks, spend time with God, and you will become able to recognize the blessings of your life. Thanks be to God! Amen.