

Word and Work

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

In a Super Bowl spirit, I am calling an audible this morning, and I beg your forgiveness for what is as close to an improvisational decision as I have recently made. I had planned to do two things this morning – or one thing with two movements. I had planned to discuss the nature of the Bible, its authority and inspiration and how it works in our lives. I would have used the lens of the Confession of 1967, whose language 50 years ago about the Bible was instructive, provocative and certainly controversial. We even included a section of the confession in the bulletin this morning and I had planned to walk us through it. Read it anyway – you will be edified.

Then I planned to take that understanding and apply it to the iconic words we encounter this morning –from Psalm 15 and Micah 6 and Matthew 5 and how those words, and the inspiration and authority behind them, provide a roadmap for us for today. That second part will still happen, in a different way. The first won't. That's the audible.

Because I want to tell you about a holy day – this past Thursday. Now I believe every day is a holy day, so this day was holy in a particular way. It wasn't a perfect day, but it also was not a terrible, horrible, no good very bad day either. It was a holy day. And I mean to tell you about it not because it is autobiographical. That would be more self-indulgent than I'd ever care to be. You had holy days as well on Thursday, days filled with holiness. But I hope it is representative. And I hope it is provocative. And I hope it is aspirational.

Please know that wherever I go, whatever meeting, I feel like I am taking you all with me, your commitments, your vision, your faith, our shared ministry. Just as I hope that wherever you are, church or not, work, volunteering, play, family, you bring your faith with you, and even the life of this faith community.

So here goes...

It began early, with a breakfast at the Brighton Board of Education for interfaith religious leaders. That matters itself this week, that Christians and Jews and Muslims gathered. Our topic was the Brighton High School Mosaic Club, a student organization that focuses on diversity – race, gender, orientation, religious, political diversity. It was inspiring – if our youth can do it, why can't we? But it also reminded us of the challenges we face as deeply held convictions bump into the quest for inclusion. I left hopeful, and thankful.

Then it was to the office for some emails...actually a lot of emails. And some other stuff, proof-reading, personnel, finances, stewardship – yes, STEWARDSHIP – and strategic planning. John Calvin said that administration was a ministry and I try to remember that, and manifest it.

Then our Thursday Voices gathering, where we held a rich conversation about an essay by the acclaimed black theologian Howard Thurman. I will post a link to it; it's worth tracking down. Its focus was on the "sound of the genuine," and how we, each of us, listen for the authentic call of our life's journey. Thurman encouraged his readers to "Get still enough to hear the rumbling of the sound of the genuine in you."

Thurman included a poem by Catherine Coblentz:

"Sing your own song, said the river/
Sing, sing your own song/
Out of yesterday
song comes/
It goes into tomorrow,
/Sing your own song./
With your life fashion
beauty,
/This too is the song./
Riches will pass and power,
/But beauty remains./

Sing your own song./
All that is worth doing,
/Do well, the river said./
Sing, sing
your own song/
Certain and round be the measure/
Every line graceful and
true/
Time is the mold, the weaver, carver,
/Time and the workman together,
/Sing
your own song well,
/Sing well, the river said,
/Sing your own song well./"

All the rest of the day, and to this moment, those words have haunted me. What would it look like for me, or you, to fashion beauty, to sing our own song well?

Following was a conversation about a neighboring church in the presbytery. Its profile is different from ours, but they are asking many of the same questions we

are, on a large scale about the future of religion in America, and on a smaller scale about membership and finances and building and mission and service in the city. We are connected to them, and, with different shades, it is our conversation. The evolution is fast and there is no script or handbook.

Then a discussion about public education reform in our city, a long time commitment of this congregation with a particular and energized focus now. Much of the discussion is about tactics and strategy, but it is undergirded by deeper issues, again, the future of the city, race, poverty, equity, how committed citizens can make a difference, the faith perspective on all of this. Like the conversation about the shifting religious landscape, this one was energizing and rigorous and not linear, calling forth our passion and the best of our thinking and commitment.

Then more emails.

Other things were happening in the church that day. Our educational building was being outfitted with WiFi, a great thing. We offered food to some 30 neighbors in our Food Cupboard, where many of you volunteer. Bell choirs rehearsed. Meetings were planned. Letters were sent. The bulletin was photo-copied. All typical. And all extraordinary.

At 6:00, about 40 of us gathered for the final discussion session of Ta-Nehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. We joined with members of the Gates and Laurelton Presbyterian Churches, and others. The three sessions were very good and sometimes difficult, as the Coates book invites us to look deeply at racism in America, its legacy and implications now. Much heartbreak, and outrage, and fear. No answers, let alone easy ones. And much more conversation to come, which we hope will lead to action. But I was gratified by our willingness to engage, and to acknowledge, for those of us who Coates identifies "believe ourselves to be white," our participation and complicity in what has been and our ability to change direction on what may be.

From that discussion many of us joined hundreds more for a simply phenomenal evening of music in our beautiful sanctuary, in conjunction with RIT's Martin

Luther King, Jr. celebration. Our Third Church Chancel Choir hit a home run, as did a marvelous soloist.

The highlight of the evening was the presence of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. It will be left for another time to consider the sheer musicality of their performance. They sang exquisite arrangement after exquisite arrangement of spirituals, and did so with a stunning demonstration of ensemble-ness, which is not a word, but you get my point. The first section of their program was interspersed with slave narrations, which were both heartbreaking and strangely and surprisingly hopeful. Still, it was hard not to be shaken a little at least by the juxtaposition of such beauty, and such beautiful young lives, with the shameful history and legacy of slavery, brought to the very moment by our book discussion from just moments before.

Then it was more emails, and then home for a caffeine free Diet Coke and off to bed.

One day. One holy day. For me. For us. Big issues and every day ones. Followed by another holy day, mine and yours. And through it all, the persistent questions of how we live our lives, how we exhibit our values, how we live out our faith, how we make sense and find meaning?

By now, had the original plan unfolded, I would have established how we are formed by scripture, and guided by it, and prodded by it. I would have made the case that theories of biblical inspiration – while important – were less important than what we do with these words, their authority. That opening a Bible and taking the words seriously is much more important than arguing about it.

So let's do that. Psalm 15: "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" What are our ethical demands as we seek life with God?

And Micah 6, no words more iconic than "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God..." What does justice, and kindness, and humility look like as you place your day, any day, alongside that barometer? What does justice and kindness and humility look like as we read the paper or scroll through the news on our phone, or have conversations with our neighbors or children? How does Micah 6 matter, for example, as we think about immigration? It does, I believe. How? And what will we do?

And the Beatitudes: Look what brings about blessing. As we live our days, what will it look like for you and me to hunger and thirst for righteousness? What will mercy look like? What will peacemaking look like?

One day. Your day. My day. Our day. And when your caffeine free Diet Coke is finished at the end of the day and you lay your head on your pillow and close your eyes, when you take a look at the hours just passed, you realize how many opportunities you've been given. You realize that issues aren't issues, but people. That politics matters as an arena for us to live out our faith. That that faith is not a collection of theoretical concepts, but a series of invitations to make a difference to those who grieve and mourn, to those who are excluded, to those who simply need to experience the word in one form or another. That that faith is the air we breathe, the space we inhabit, the words we speak and the actions we take, the lives that intersect with ours, not just this hour, this worship hour, but every hour. And when we look for guidance, for a roadmap, there the Bible is, made real to us, and powerful and true to us, by the Spirit.

One day. Holy, perhaps. Profane, also perhaps. A gift, to be sure, and a series of opportunities to live our faith, to fashion beauty, to sing our song well, to live on God's holy hill, to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly, to be blessed, and to be a blessing, for such a time as this, even this day, that the Lord has made. Amen.