

Is This What Jesus Told You Guys to Do?

Micah 6: 6-8

We are citizens of two realms. First, each of us is the citizen of a nation. Today is the 4th of July, the birthday of the United States and most of us in this room are U.S. citizens. America is a nation founded on some key ideals that blend the best of our religious values and those of the Enlightenment. We hold that "all people are created equal," and we're finally beginning to realize this. We believe that each citizen has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We are a nation with liberty and justice for all.

On the birthday of our nation, it is appropriate to ask these questions: "Is the current state of America at all what the founding fathers had in mind?" "Where do we want to be headed as a society?" These are not questions for this time of worship, but I encourage you to talk about them at today's cookouts and 4th of July fireworks gatherings.

For the Christian Church today, there are some similar questions. How far have we come from, or perhaps strayed from, the early church? Have the changes been good, bad, or just different? Are we in synch today with what Jesus might have had in mind? What would Jesus say of us today? So we come to today's "Ask Jack" question, which requires some explanation. The questioner offered these thoughts. Jesus describes the "Kingdom of God" a lot differently than what we are experiencing. Where are the "greater things than I do," "moving mountains with faith," "asking and receiving," that dynamic life "abiding in him" that he describes? This just isn't what Jesus talks about! "I have come "to create vast numbers of NGOs that will build buildings, create bureaucracies, multi-billion dollar empires (former SBC) publishing billions of Bibles and enumerable books trying to explain what I have said." Of course, we know that Jesus said, "I have come that they might have life...abundantly." (John 10:10)

In search of a question from these remarks led me to a book (Jim and Casper Go to Church, Jim Henderson and Matt Casper) Jim Henderson is a unique evangelical pastor who has always been seeking to see the Church from the perspective of the non-churched. This journey has led him project with Matt Casper, an avowed atheist with Christian ties. After all the visits to some of the most prominent churches in the Untied States, Matt Casper wrote this:

There are some wonderful things being done by the people in Christian churches: food being provided for homeless and helpless people, money being sent to the less fortunate, homes being built. But there are some incredibly nonsensical things being done too: light shows, services in stadiums, promises that "God's gonna make you rick!" You'd have to apply an awful lot of spin to any passage in the Bible to make the case for that. Jim asked me what I'd say to Christians everywhere, if I could, and I think it's quite simple. There are two rules we must all abide by to live healthy, happy lives with each other and with everyone on the planet.

- Be open-minded. Learning is the best thing that can happen to anyone.
 - Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- And though I've never met the man, I think Jesus would agree.

There is certainly a lot about the way Christians do "church" that Jesus would find puzzling and even nonsensical. Circumstances have necessitated Christians over the centuries to adjust and make choices about how to be the church. And Jesus never exactly provided a blueprint for how we should organize ourselves or conduct worship services. But Jesus placed himself squarely in

the tradition of the counter-cultural prophets of ancient Israel. If anything is clear about what Jesus had in mind, it would be the values at the heart of Judaism: "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself."

In addition to these *greatest commandments*, that lie at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and yes Islam, the words of the prophet Micah to the people of Israel that encapsulate what Jesus had in mind: "What is it that Yahweh God wants from you? Just this: to act justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with God."

Fundamental need for life to be fair and balanced (best sense) – that there are just consequences for our actions – justice is for those actions and consequences to be applied fairly and honestly regardless of race, gender, religion, nationality, or socio-economic class
Biblical justice, however, "is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them." (p.5)
Assumption that there is a right distribution of goods and access to the sources of life (p.5)
Micah addressed gross inequities in Israel (rich dominating goods of society disproportionately)
Addressing very specific injustices based on the historic distribution of land to the tribes of Israel and the laws of Sabbath, Sabbatical, and Jubilee in which all land, indebtedness, and social status would reset every fifty years – acknowledging that our possessions are not our possessions. They belong to God and we are stewards on God's behalf
Brueggemann challenges us

The truth is, in our society most of us have a disproportion of social goods and social power. And we fear the loss of our disproportion. We do not ask how we got it or what it does to others. We are, in middle America, convinced that the "system is the solution." By this, we mean that the present practice of "consumer militarism" serves well some of us who benefit from the stacking of the cards. In fact, we mean to say that we like the system because it preserves and legitimates the present disproportion which is in our favor. And here in this text (Micah 6:8 as in the Bible generally) we are invited to justice which means to reverse the disproportion. (p.21)

Those of us who live in middle class America are probably not the best ones to bring this message of justice, yet this is our calling. This is our struggle, our mission to live justice, proclaim justice, and do justice.

To love tenderly is often translated *to love mercy* or *to love kindness*. This translation reflects an active quality--to actually do it, not just love the idea of it. *To love tenderly* leads directly to Jesus' new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." (John's 13:34) Faith has an intellectual component of how and what we believe, but perhaps even more, it involves how we feel and trust. *To love tenderly* is to reflect God's covenant love. It is to grasp with our whole being that we are loved and accepted without reservation. It is to trust that the community in which we grow faith holds us tenderly during the broken apart parts of our journey as we move toward reorientation, newness, and growth. It is to trust that, with each new strength we develop, there is a corresponding weakness that shows itself for us to address. As our capacity to address childhood's fears develops, that capacity allows us the opportunity to actually address those fears within a supportive community of faith.

To walk humbly with God is, first of all, a reminder that only God is God. Neither our image of God nor anyone's image of God is the same thing as God. Practically speaking, this process

challenges us to know who our god is. It requires us to let go of false gods – commodities, goods, power, entitlements – and to treat people as people.

Secondly, *walking humbly with God* means that we need to identify how is God “for us.” There is a song we sing that says, “The Lord is on my side and has made the victory mine.” This song is not saying that God is our possession, but that God is for us. The *victory* is not our conquest, but our growth toward God’s dream, God’s vision, of shalom--peace, justice, freedom and wholeness. (*To Act Justly*, p. 54) God is for us by freeing us, by liberating us to realize our potential, to serve and love others, to do justice and to love tenderly. God’s being for us enables us to risk living large.

Walking humbly with God means that we discern who we are as God’s people – our identity. We are people learning to walk and to immerse ourselves in *shalom* as the ultimate reality. We are people who want *Shalom* to be the sign of our lives—to be for life, love, freedom, peace, and justice. And this means walking away from the death of hatred, oppression, violence, injustice, bitterness, and envy. This is our faith journey.

Singer and songwriter John McCutcheon wrote:

*Follow the light when you're lonely and lost
When out on the ocean you are tumbled and tossed
Follow your heart wherever you may be
Follow the light on home to me
There's a hole in our skyline, there's a whole in our town
There's a hole in our hearts the whole world around
How do we heal? How do we see that mercy that shines in you and me?
When the world feels so big and we seem so small
And you wonder if life has any meaning left at all
When you're losing your heart; when you're losing the fight
Hold on to my hand and we will follow the light.*

The Bible reflects centuries of discipleship. In its pages are many different images about who God is, what God wants, and what it means to be in intimate relationship with God. A beacon of light for all people to follow, one that shone brightly for Jesus and that continues to illuminate the journey for each person of faith today is simply this: What does God require of us but to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.” Like the generations before us, let us walk in that light.