

Hope In A World of Violence
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Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118
21 March 2004
Texts: Micah 6:6-8, James 2:14-18

Being number one in the world is a difficult position. Others want what you have that is disproportionately more than they have. It is a normal human behavior to want to stay on top once having attained that position. This is true for individuals, families, societal groups and nations. Throughout history this scenario has been played out time after time.

The Roman Empire in its arrogance of power and subjugation of the world's nations under the rubric Pax Romanum experienced also the corruption of power, a focus on its own monopolization of resources, a distraction of "bread and games" as a diversion from its injustice, and ultimately the reality of revolution from within and terrorist attacks from without by those who were exploited, frustrated, and alienated.

Our own country came into being out of rebellion against the injustice and greed of the number one nation on earth at the time. In revolution came freedom and a way to govern that promised to be more inclusive and just and provided a model for others. The process of governing for the next two hundred plus years has had its ups and downs with struggles to eradicate slavery, to provide rights for women, and to become a place where diverse peoples could find a better life, a supposed place called freedom.

Today the process has come full circle – yester year's revolutionaries have become today's establishment. With the cold war over, our country is now the number one power in the world and history appears to repeat itself. As the months and years pass we greedily utilize more and more of the world's resources, carelessly manage the environment, build few safety nets for our country's poor and disenfranchised, have little concern for the citizens of the third world, and largely ignore our connection and responsibility to the nations and peoples of our shrinking planet. The result appears to be a growing fear for our security that isolates us even more from the world community. Now we are experiencing a very real response of hatred to our greed and arrogance at the expense of others and increased terrorism from among the disenfranchised and disillusioned in a violent wave to bring retribution culminating in 9/11 and its aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq. As we meet together this morning the question must be asked, "Where is there hope in a world of violence?"

In the face of such a violent world our Scripture from the Old Testament is instructive to us as Christian individuals and a faith community. - - - "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" These words not only express the divine will for the Lord's followers in the world but also continue to offer the only real hope for humanity in the midst of burgeoning injustice and violence. The covenant community of God has always been the source of new life and transformation – God's way of redeeming the world. These simple yet profound words give direction for us as we travel our pilgrim journeys as servants to this world. God's remnant, the church, has survived by grace all the empires that have come and gone and has a mission to the current nation where we happen to be citizens. We are in a time and place where the Lord would have us be and we are called to be faithful. What is our faith calling? "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

The prophet speaks with clarity when he indicates that God's forgiven and accepted followers need to walk and act daily in faithfulness. The epistle writer in James emphasizes the same reality – "Don't talk about faith and religious beliefs if your faith does not produce actions in line with your commitment to God's truth." God's vision and call is to transform the world system and we are either part of the solution or part of the problem. Faith and its power to change can only be realized in those whose words and actions represent God's way. Jesus also stressed that the test of true discipleship lies not in words but in actions: "It is not those who say to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Mtt. 7:21,22)

So the words of the prophet Micah ring clear as the only hope in a world of violence. Let's look at these three requirements of God for meaningful servanthood. The first responsibility for us is to "do justice." Justice is an action that the faithful do. It's not enough to wish it or to complain about its absence. Justice is to work for fairness and real equality for all people, particularly the weak and powerless who are exploited by others. Walter Bruggemann declares, "Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and return it to them." Justice then redescribes the world. Justice as God does justice has no place for "haves" and "have nots." That God is against the status quo is one of the hardest things to believe if you are a Christian who happens to profit from the status quo. We often reason to ourselves that our intentions are good but do not examine the consequences of our actions. We may even respond to injustice with a charitable gift as long as we don't have to confront the causes of it. (Illus: tension and bind of my portfolio).

It is important to realize the relationship between injustice and violence. The spiral of violence is initiated at the points of injustice. Over time growing hopelessness for any change brings about anger and violence that are seen as threat to the order, peace, and stability of society. When revolt and terrorism result, reason is found to justify repression, further violence, and counter terrorism as the only way to deal with the opposition. This process continues to reproduce itself unless the injustices are addressed and solved.

As Christ's disciples today, our actions should be manifestations of God's active presence. We need to act to show God's power, not our own; to reveal God's redemptive grace, not our own; to open hearts and ears to the one who sits on the throne and declares, "Now I am making the whole of creation new." (Rev.21:5) This means we must not only reach out to the hungry and the homeless, but also engage the structures that control distribution of resources; we must serve the sick and contribute to the needs of health research, but also must address the issues that deny so many adequate health care; we can give to others out of our wealth, but also must confront institutions and economic policies that continue to enrich the few and impoverish the many in our nation and in the world; we can reach out to listen and negotiate our differences with our neighbor, but must confront the economic, political, and military powers to cease their precipitous and destructive proliferation of arms and nuclear weapons to the total disregard for humanity and the creation. In loving concern we need to speak out as Christian people. Rabbi Joachim Prinz, a survivor of the Holocaust, declares, "When I was a rabbi in the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing I learned in my life under those circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. God spoke and the world came into being. We too must speak to create the world God envisioned – a world of understanding and peace."

With Martin Luther, we need Christian women and men of thought and conscience who will be able to say, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God - - - to go against conscience is neither right or safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

The second requirement of the faithful servant is to "love kindness." Kindness in this context has to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness. It is the key element in relations between lovers, between human friends, between God and humanity. It speaks of covenant faithfulness to God motivated by love. God has called us into the community of the faithful to demonstrate love and compassion in a world torn by fear, hatred, and violence. We are to live as we have been renewed, as those who experience that "perfect love casts out fear." (1John 4:18) The Apostle Paul exhorts, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, acceptable, and perfect." (Rom. 12:2) This is a consistent life style, not just occasional acts of mercy or piety.

God's compassion and mercy are demonstrated in the patient action of being a loving presence and force in the midst of our everyday life. Such actions include healing, consoling, comforting and reconciling others. They are actions that remove the fear, suspicion, and power-hungry competition that cause an escalating arms race and outbreaks of violence and war, an increasing separation between the wealthy and the poor, and an intensifying cruelty between the powerful and the powerless. They are actions that lead people to listen to each other and heal each other's wounds. They are actions based on a faith that knows

God's presence in our lives and wants that presence to be experienced by individuals, communities, societies and nations.

Such compassion is not sentimental. Rather it is risky, vulnerable, and often "tough love." Confrontation in love, rather than in self-righteousness, is often called for in concern for transforming the ills God deplors. William Sloane Coffin rightly observes, "Compassion and justice are companions, not choices." Micah states the same. "There are times we need to speak out of our faith to confront injustice and evil. Dissent is not disloyalty; in fact acquiescence to evil represents the sin of cowardice." Coffin declares.

I would challenge each of us this day to rededicate ourselves to show our love, care, and concerns daily by reaching out to needs as we encounter them, and to speak out courageously to define injustice and demand change on behalf of all peoples and nations.

The final requirement is just as important as the other two. "To walk humbly with your God," calls attention to the fact that God is our constant companion that informs the way we speak and act each day. Our ultimate loyalty is to the true number one who loves and transforms us and to his kingdom way that is 180° from the conventional wisdom of this world. The American way is not synonymous with the way of God. To believe so would be idolatry. Jim Wallis in *Agenda for a Biblical People* writes, Biblically understood, idolatry originates in the human decision to seek life and salvation apart from the source of life in God. Idols are imposters of God. They may be things, ideas, persons or institutions exalted and worshipped as gods. Rather than these finite realities serving people, people come to serve and worship them as objects of ultimate concern that are allowed to substitute for God. Idolatry denies the place of God as the giver of life and the author of salvation, dehumanizes people by making them pay homage to objects not deserving of worship, and denigrates the proper vocation of things meant to be servants of human life, not rulers over it."

We as Christians and Americans have a form of dual citizenship. We are citizens of this country who enjoy its freedoms that include the right of dissent when necessary. We are also citizens of God's kingdom and have allegiance to the one who gives new life and brings transformation. As elected representatives called by our God, as a community of the faithful, may we lovingly be faithful to our Lord and be ambassadors for justice and compassion not only for this nation, but also humanity and the creation. William Sloane Coffin explains, "A politically committed spirituality contends against wrong without becoming wrongly contentious. It confronts national self-righteousness without personal self-righteousness. It cherishes God's creation; it serves the poor; it is not interested in the might of a nation but in the goodness of its people."

So, we again raise the question, "Is there hope in a world of violence?" I firmly believe there is real hope – a hope that has continued through generations of world powers coming and going. That hope is found in the continuing and growing community of faith as it reaches out to human need and confronts with concern the problems of injustice seen in structures and institutions. Will we be faithful in doing our part as God's servants and ambassadors? It will be tough and risky. It may seem scary and overwhelming. Henri Nouwen responds to this by stating, "So many terrible things happen every day that we start wondering whether the few things we do ourselves make any sense. When people are starving only a few thousand miles away, when wars are raging far and near, when countless people in our cities have no homes to live in, our own activities look futile. Such considerations, however, can paralyze and depress us. - - -Here the word "call" becomes important. We are not called to save the world, solve all problems, and help all people. But each of us has our own unique call, in our families, in our work, in our world. We have to keep asking God to help us see clearly what our call is and to give us the strength to live out that call with trust. Then we will discover that our faithfulness to a small task is the most healing response to the illnesses of our time."

It will take courage and connection with God's ever revealing Spirit to develop real hope. May God help us all to be courageously faithful. Amen

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