

A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Hopefully NOT) My Last Sermon: Mission as a Reflex of Faith
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
August 17th, 2008
Micah 6: 6-8; Matthew 25:31-40

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give him my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you. O mortal, what is good;

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 25: 31-40

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then they will sit on the throne of his glory.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

When Louise approached the pastoral staff with the idea of preaching these weeks in August on an aspect of our personal faith journeys, she described her concept as being like the book, *The Last Lecture*. Well, we all know what happened to that guy, so I decided mine would be named, “Hopefully Not My Last Sermon!” But, I do like the concept of this sermon series, as each of us here in this sanctuary knows that our faith is a life long journey and that we wrestle at times and sit comfortably in other times with all aspects of our faith. Even though ministers joke that we all only have one sermon that we continue to give throughout our lives, there is some truth to it. There is a strong component of our faith that called us into the ministry and continues to motivate us in our calling into the ministry. As you know faith is a multi-faceted jewel. In the time period of a non-painful sermon, we can only offer you a portion of what is dear to us and burning within our hearts. However, I am sure you will have gained a greater understanding of your pastors by the end of these four weeks.

I have an advantage here when talking about my faith journey as my story begins here at Fairmount. Most of you know I am a child of this church and am a product of the Sunday school and Youth Fellowship here at Fairmount Presbyterian Church. I was a candidate for ministry under care of this church like Terra Winston and Logan Skelly are and I was even ordained during a Sunday morning service along with another Fairmount candidate for the ministry. There are still some people in sitting in this congregation who were my teachers, leaders, and mentors in those early formative years. As I said in the sermon I preached here on the 25th anniversary of my ordination, I am deeply grateful and thankful for all that you have given me. I am a part of all of you. The faith concepts I learned as a child have been carried with me throughout my life. That is all of us are blessed children of a loving God and that this relationship carries with it a responsibility to act loving to others.

I am a product of Fairmount, but also a product of my education. I went to McCormick Theological Seminary located in the University of Chicago where I learned about God’s call to justice, equality, and shalom. It is an urban seminary which prides itself in putting out pastors with a calling in social justice concerns. It was at McCormick that I was taught that being a blessed child of God means action. I learned that there is a covenant set up with God’s faithful which involves doing God’s work on earth. We are to be God’s hands and heart showing God’s love and mercy to those in all of

creation. God's call to love others is not passive but involves the action verbs in the passage from Micah. It involves DOING justice and ACTING with kindness and advocating for all to feel the same blessed relationship as a child of God that we here today take for granted. I learned that it was not enough to feel loving toward others, but that the role of the Christian was to be and bring that love to them.

So I went to Columbia University to study Social Work to learn how to bring love and justice to others. As a dual competency major I was to bridge the two degrees and show how the practice of social work can be done within Christian Ministry. I learned as all social workers do, about systems management and how to bring correct systems together to make positive outcome for individuals and groups who are in crisis. I also began to realize that an individual's faith and God's call to care for others makes the church an institution where the ministry of justice and reconciliation are possible. I began to see the role of the church as a motivator for change of social injustices and an effective avenue for healing ills which decay the urban areas.

This theology fights against and is in contrast to our popular society where personal faith and piety promise a feel good Christianity. People flock to church to receive personal blessings and to know that they are God's chosen ones. Pastors in Mega churches are promising that the blessings of God are ours for the taking, if we just have faith. If we have the faith all can be ours! This feel good religion is not in Jesus' teachings. I have read the same Bible those pastors have and to me God's promise of blessings comes to those who love and care for others.

The story of the separation of the sheep from the goats that was read from the passage from Matthew today speaks to the importance of mission work to the Christian. There is just no other way to exegete this passage without stating very strongly that we are to involve our selves actively in feeding, clothing, visiting, and welcoming others as Christians as in doing so we are ministering to Christ. God's mission work should be a reflex of our faith. If you want to feel good, if you want to be sitting at the right hand of God, there is a clear expectation! This message is clear: the work of the church is in what we at Fairmount call mission outreach and this is the work that we will finally be judged by as to our faith in action. God calls for a just society, and we are responsible to bring it into fruition.

Throughout my faith journey and ministry, I have been able to work on this in many ways. At another large suburban congregation I was the minister of mission involving the congregation in weekly meals programs to the homeless which then began church and community advocacy programs for ending hunger and its causes and finding affordable housing for people without shelter. I served in an urban church in the Collinwood area of Cleveland integrating a church and serving a population that needed empowerment. I have served on the church development ministry of Presbytery which helps our urban churches. Later, while I was on staff at the Presbytery, I staffed the Church Development Ministries and the Justice Ministries which involves the Presbytery in social justice causes and programs locally and world wide.

But lately, while I have been serving at Fairmount, one of my focuses and callings have been to support the urban churches within our Presbytery which are threatened with closing. This past week I received mail from The Rev. Tony Britt, the pastor of New Life Fellowship, which is one of the new church developments within our Presbytery. Tony was filling me in that the summer programs New Life church offers to neighborhood youth were just finishing. New Life is located in the poorest area of the city of Cleveland, in Miles Park. Youth in this area are terribly at risk as there is no infrastructure built in to combat the ills of urban life and poverty which mark the area. New Life, under Pastor Tony's leadership runs summer and year long programs such as 'Hoops4Life' which engage youth in basketball programs and character and spiritual formation. Tony is a real athlete besides being a powerful pastor and can speak to the kids about the importance of sports and faith in their lives. The ministry at New Life is meeting a real need within our community. Besides these athletic programs, the noon meal is offered to all the children in the area. These are kids who need the meal, need the programs, and need the spiritual guidance of a caring Christian in their lives. These programs are the only thing offered within the community the church is located. Unfortunately, this will most likely be the last summer for New Life Community to offer this and other programs. The membership can not afford the building and the charter school whose rent helped pay the utility bills has moved out. Pastor Britt was not paid a salary for over a month this year until the Presbytery and another church within our Presbytery stepped in and offered to help pick up the deficit this summer.

Unfortunately New Life Community is not our only urban church in a crisis. I could name nine other urban churches which show danger signs of possibly

closing within the next few years. These are churches within the city where Presbyterians are making a difference. These are churches which have meal programs, serve the homeless within our city, have youth programs aimed at teens at risk in the city of Cleveland, and have food pantries. One church has funds to stay open for just the next four months and another told its membership at a congregational meeting this summer that they can hang on for three to four years. These are the urban and first ring churches located in areas where there is the greatest need for Christ's presence and ministry. These are churches who have the greatest need for great leadership but who can only afford part time ministers and whose members are already strained with personal financial needs. These are congregations in large old buildings with huge energy and maintenance bills whose structures no longer fit the needs of their ministries. These are active social justice ministries that are just a boiler problem, a roof leak, or a large gas bill away from having to close their doors to the need of their community of Cleveland.

Last year I agreed to moderate the commission to close one of the Presbyterian Churches within the city of Cleveland. It was the one I had served as pastor. The grief work the commission had to do in helping this congregation close when many members had been members for decades of their lives was very painful. I knew God had given me the job because I loved each of them empathized and felt their sadness. Saddest of all to the Presbytery commission was to end the programs the congregation had begun that ministered to the community where the church had been located. The coffee house, the food pantry, the meal program, the community art programs all had to be closed. At the Presbytery meeting where we reported our work, another urban church was closed as well. At the time nothing was said of the sad statement of closing two urban churches. Even more upsetting was that there was no mention of a plan to keep the other urban churches from having the same thing happen within the next years.

This energized a group within the Presbytery, of which Dick Clewell and I are a part, to create a strategy to save the urban churches and Presbyterian ministries within our city. Although formed out of frustration, we are motivated to help the urban churches look for solutions and partnerships so that they can continue to feed, to clothe, to empower the powerless and to bring God's vision of shalom into the city. The group has begun to empower the urban churches by sharing their resources and we will be asking suburban churches to enter into ministry with them.

We are also looking at creative ways to solve the problem that these churches are saddled with huge old buildings that are draining their resources and keeping them from doing ministries that they are called to do. North Presbyterian Church on 40th and Superior, which has an active meal program and ministry to the homeless, is selling their building and hoping to move into another one which better fits the needs of their programs and congregation. But the greatest task will be to get the whole Presbytery to agree to a strategy for urban ministry within the city of Cleveland. To do nothing means that the churches will close and the Presbyterian Church will not have a presence within our city. We need to discern what God is calling us to be and do. I firmly believe this is a job for all the Presbyterian churches within our Presbytery.

A spiritual journey is a life long trip. I am not where I will finally end up and this calling to mission is not the entirety of my faith. I do know that in my daily prayers which take place when I swim every morning, I thank God for all that I have been given and ask God to use me and to show me how best to be Christ's disciple. And the answer is always to see Christ in others, which is a task that is not always the easiest to do. But right now it is calling me to help in solving a crisis in our urban churches. This fits right in with the foundation of my personal theology that we are to involve ourselves in mission as a reflex of our faith.

There are not that many of you who were here decades ago when a painfully shy young woman named Missy Weatherhead became one of your candidates for the ministry. When I went before the session to tell them of my call to the ministry, I cried as I had never spoken in public about myself before. Well, look at me now! All I can witness and testify to you is that God empowers those who answer the call to do God's work. When you put yourself in God's hands and say let me be your hands and do your will, God will give you the strength and gifts you need to do God's will. And the good news is that God is calling you as well. You too are called to do Christ's work and see Christ in all of God's creation. I look forward to knowing how that will unveil itself with each of you! Amen.

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