

First UCC – Northfield (Lauren Baske-Davis Installation)

November 20, 2022

Psalm 96 & Micah 6:6-8

“The Things Required”

“O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the fields exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord.” (Psalm 96:1, 11-13)

What a fitting psalm of abundant praise and all-encompassing joy for this particular day at First UCC, the Sunday before thanksgiving, a Sunday when you receive new members into your community, and the day of Rev. Lauren Baske-Davis’s installation as your Associate Minister. This is indeed a day when we can shout our gratitude to the mountaintops and invite all of creation to join in, because in many ways this day marks the start of a new day, a new song you will sing. It was just 8 months ago that I stepped into this pulpit on the occasion of Pastor Cindy’s installation, and today Pastor Lauren is installed and declared a “settled” part of your pastoral leadership. It been a long time since First UCC had two settled pastors in place. Oh yes, this is indeed a day for praise and thanksgiving.

I rejoice with you in this moment & give thanks for the mutual and prayerful discernment that has led to this day. Over the last 3 years I have told Lauren more than once how fortunate this church is to have her, how much I admired her capacity and willingness to adapt and take on a litany of changing roles as the congregation navigated transitional waters, how grateful I've been for her steady and beautiful ministry with you. She has been and will continue to be a gift to this church, to her colleagues, to the community and to the Minnesota Conference. And I know from very recent conversation with Lauren how much she loves all of you and the ministry you have together. Among other things she told me that she is excited to be part of a vibrant, active, caring force in the community, that you are a spirited people grounded in scripture and faith, that you are a church "willing to be brave", with a great love for justice and an enormous capacity for caring and resilience and joy. That, my friends, is a pastor who truly does feel called to the place where God has led her, and it is cause for thanksgiving this day.

When I asked Lauren if there were a particular scripture text that she'd like me to preach on, it was the Micah passage you heard earlier. While I only asked for verses 6-8 to be read this morning, it's important to offer a little broader context. Micah was a so-called "minor prophet" with a major message toward

the end of the eighth century BCE. His historical context was war, the constant aggression of the Assyrian Empire against Israel and Judah. It was a time of deep instability and ever-present danger. It was also a time when the practice of religion had become heavy with sacrifices and loud in lip service, but light on daily, authentic faithfulness.

So in chapter 6 we find God and God's people caught in a controversy with one another. God wonders why the people have turned from God as they have. "Answer me," God insists, "what exactly have I done to warrant this?" God then reminds the people of all the ways God has saved them in the past and been faithful to them in their need. The people's response is typical for that time. They think that surely some sort of sacrifice will calm God down and get them back in God's favor, so they offer up an escalating list of possible sacrifices. But the reply that comes points them away from their rote sacrifices and toward a new way of faithfulness: "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?"

Being in faithful relationship with God is not about keeping a cosmic scorecard or participating in mindless, one-off acts that we think will get us back

into God's good graces. What we see here is that we're called to a new way of life, a way of being in community and engaging our world.

A life of faithfulness requires us to do justice. What does that mean, exactly? It's been said by Cornel West that "justice is what love looks like in public". It's having the courage to see with clear eyes the inequities around us, the indignities people are suffering, and to be so uneasy with the way things are that we'll do everything we can to change them. Doing justice is the work of dismantling the attitudes, the policies, and the structures that lead to others' pain. Doing justice asks us to recognize our own power and agency and privilege and use it for good rather than evil. It invites us to believe and work for a vision of the world where none are in need and all can have joy, a world where the Creation no longer groans under the weight of our abuse, a world where every child of God and every part of God's Creation is seen as precious and good. What is required of us but to do justice.

But let it quickly be said that doing justice is not the whole of it. Because justice is long-haul work that sometimes takes a generation to realize, and in the meantime there are people hungry now. There are people living on the streets now. There are natural disasters devastating people's lives now. There are communities being ignored and belittled and oppressed and killed now. And

those spaces and places and people need our loving kindness and mercy now. This world, our communities, God knows, could use more love and grace and mercy right now. We can't wait for the slow arc of justice to ultimately unfold. A life of faithfulness requires loving kindness on the way to the justice we seek....as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount "giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, taking care of the sick."

Sometimes, in advocacy circles and even in the United Church of Christ, I've noticed that there's this idea that doing the hard core work of justice is the only thing that matters, the only endeavor that has value, that somehow charitable acts and the work of compassionate service are beneath us or not good enough or too simplistic. But this passage from Micah reminds us that a life of faithfulness is one where the ministry of justice-seeking and the ministry of compassion and loving kindness go hand in hand. Neither one on its own is sufficient. What is required of you but to do justice AND to love kindness.

And then there's one more, very important thing to what God has told us is good, an essential requirement to living a life of faithfulness. It's the part we often look past in this verse, but it's the part that we cannot do without. Walk humbly with your God.

Humility is not our strong suit in America, or even sometimes in our churches. But we're told here that a life of faithfulness, that even the bold and powerful work of doing justice and the dedicated ministry of outreach and care, must be undertaken with humility. In my home office, I have a poster of one of the United Church of Christ's latest mantras. It reads "Speak Up. Stand Up. Show Up for Justice". I love so much about that, and its sentiment is quintessentially UCC, we who like to always be on the front lines of justice. But it is also an incomplete notion.

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, as I worked alongside Black faith leaders to form a response to the horrifying injustice and brutality of his death and all it symbolized, I learned a powerful lesson. Sometimes we who are white and privileged have to learn to not always being the ones speaking up and standing up. There are times when we need to actually back up and shut up & leave room for others to lead, for others to take center stage & tell their story in their own voice in the way they want it told.

Humility is a necessary frame for a life of faithfulness. We don't know everything. We don't have all the answers. We haven't seen all we need to see or heard all we need to hear. Our life together in Christian community requires us

to listen carefully to others, to be open and curious about what others can teach us, and to leave room for God to do God's amazing, unexpected, Spirit-filled thing.

Because the point after all is not only to do justice, or to love kindness, or even to walk humbly, but to do it all in the steadfast knowledge that God is at our side while we do it, that God and what God needs of us is the reason we do any of it all.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann said in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, that if we fail to ground our living and all the good we do in a foundation of faith and the God who calls us we are “like a cut flower without nourishment”, no “deeper than human courage and good intentions.”

First United Church of Christ, may you never forget to seek God's leading and wisdom and grace in your own walk of faith. May you always remember what is good and the things that are required of you: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with the God who calls you and claims you and indeed rejoices in you this day. Amen.