

Prelude: “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah” [Annie Schulz]

Gathering Thoughts: [Doug Schulz]

Welcome to our Grace Mennonite Church worship time for this second Sunday in September. Today we launch a new series of biblical reflections that we are calling “Walking Humbly Toward God”. Beth Woelk will read the Psalm and later I’ll be reading various short scripture sections from the Bible books of the prophets, and Kevin McCabe will illustrate how the teachings of these ancient writers applies to issues in the world today. Music is selected by Annie Schulz and presented by Women’s Chorus. Ted Kopp is our sound and recording technician. Let’s join our hearts together now in the Call to Worship and Opening Prayer.

Call to Worship & Prayer: [Doug Schulz]

Come together, O children of the Creator who loves us each and every one.
Come to worship the Lord of Life, who weeps to see peace and justice done.
Join your hearts, fill your spirit, with compassion’s truth. Feel it! Hear it!
Let our souls be made whole as we work in this world while the kin-dom comes.

O God, who we call the Father of Light or the Mother of Wisdom’s Beauty,
help us today to consider our ways of living so that we would reflect your will
in this broken world where so many, ourselves at times, as well, are self-absorbed.
Make us, through our worship, more awakened in awareness of your goodness,
and that your just kindness is wealth to be shared with everyone, everywhere.
So, take our words and our thoughts as praise to you, the Gracious One,
and energize our believing and our acting so that we would be more gracious too.
We pray in the name of Jesus, whose walk with you was humble and true,
and whose gift to us is that we could move through life with him as saving guide,
and day by day by grace, be renewed. AMEN

Women’s Chorus: “Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven” [VU #240 vv. 1,3&4]

*Praise my soul, the God of heaven, glad of heart your carols raise;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who, like me, should sing God’s praise.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace!*

*Like a loving parent caring, God knows well our feeble frame;
gladly all our burdens bearing, still to countless years the same.
Alleluia! Alleluia! All within me, praise God’s name.*

*Frail as summer’s flower we flourish; blows the wind and it is gone.
but, while mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise the everlasting One.*

Scripture: Psalm 103: 1-12 [Beth Woelk]

- 1 Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- 2 Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- 3 who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- 4 who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- 5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live[a]
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- 6 The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- 7 He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- 8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- 9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

Prayers of the People: [Doug Schulz]

Here's a prayer of intercession and commitment, written by a woman named Terri, and posted on *RevGalBlogPals* website.

Prayer for Transformation

Holy and Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of life,
for the gift of your Son, for the gift of the Holy Spirit

Lead us through the trials, the suffering and sorrow, the challenges and struggles,
the tired times and dark places

Be with those who weep, or cannot sleep, who have no peace, who seek release
Lead us with grace, with love, with peace. Fill us with hope, with patience, with
stamina. Transform us in your image, in your Son, in your Name.

Transform us to grow, to understand, to see. Transform us that we can be made whole. And in wholeness may we be the hands and heart of Christ.

And now we also offer up the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, saying:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.” AMEN

Women’s Chorus: “God of the Bible” [STJ, #27, vv. 1,2&5]

*God of the Bible, God in the Gospel, hope seen in Jesus, hope yet to come,
you are our center, daylight or darkness, freedom or prison, you are our home.*

Refrain: *Fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise,
God always faithful, you do not change.*

*God in our struggles, God in our hunger, suffering with us, taking our part,
still you em-pow’r us, mothering Spirit, feeding, sustaining, from your own heart.*

*Hope we must carry, shining and certain through all our turmoil, terror and loss,
bonding us gladly one to the other, till our world changes facing the cross.*

Scriptures & Sermon [Doug Schulz & Kevin McCabe]

DRIVING A TRACTOR INTO THE LEGISLATURE: THE PROPHETIC TRADITION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Doug: Today’s reflection on Bible texts will be offered by Kevin McCabe, who will provide some understanding of what very old biblical teachings might mean in the modern day, even right now near where we live. The texts I’ll read are from the section of the Bible that contains words by very holy, deeply convicted, and sometimes quite angry, people called prophets. We are calling this sermon: “Driving a Tractor into the Legislature” with a sub-title: “The Prophetic Tradition of Social Justice.”

Bible prophecy. Most of us think of it as foretelling the future. True, prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel did do some very futuristic visioning. But the prophets we’ll refer to today wrote back then about the way people who had political, social and moral influence were conducting themselves and leading others. These prophets were like honest news-reporters who did not work for any media outlet editor or owner. They served God as they experienced in their conscience a sense of right and wrong based on the way leaders followed the spiritual teachings of the Jewish people up to

that time. By the way, the readings I'll do are from the minor prophets; so-called not because they are not so important, but because their writings were a lot shorter.

Now, since two of us will be sort of sharing this sermon, it will be a bit longer than some others. So tighten your sandal-straps; here we go on a little biblical journey that will actually have us walking through our own region and province! You'll see what I mean. We start with the words of a prophet named Amos, a humble farmer who did not want to be known as a prophet... he just wanted to be faithful to God in how he lived, and in how his people conducted their lives in the world.

(Amos 7:14-15): "Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophecy to my people Israel.'"

Kevin: For me, this passage evokes the image of a Mennonite farmer jumping on his tractor and driving to Queen's Park to confront some of our lawmakers there. Specifically, I am thinking of an Amish dairy farmer who attended an Anabaptist conference in Niagara about twelve years ago. He and his fellow Amish farmers had run their dairy operations in the foothills of the Appalachians for generations. Now the state legislature of New Jersey was striving to put them out of business so the land could be swallowed up by developers to build condos and expensive retirement communities. If the farmers tried to start a dairy co-operative, the legislators would put constraints on their operations. Any attempts by the farmers to diversify their revenues were directly countered by the state's politicians, who obviously had lively expectations of future benefits, if the condos went through. The Amish were hanging tough, but were up against a wall of political obstructionism.

Doug: In my sermon last week I spoke about the truth that the people of God are commanded in the Bible to "love your neighbour as yourself", even if the neighbour has very different views in terms of politics or religion or the moral order of society. That is not a simple task. But the prophet Amos allows no exceptions. Whoever you are, you are called to stand up against the corruption that comes when those in power with wealth and/or influence selectively practice "law and order" in ways to hold onto position or gain profit rather than to benefit and protect everyone equally.

(Amos 3: 13,15): "Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob," says the Lord God, the God of hosts... 'I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end,' says the Lord."

Kevin: One of the measures of the gap between rich and poor is their style of accommodation. An old figure puts the number of homeless in Toronto at 30,000. Likewise, there has been a rapid increase in the homeless population of Niagara.

This situation derives partly from steep declines in government funding for affordable housing which began in the 1990s. Contrariwise, I know of a man who lives alone in a three million dollar house on the escarpment. He also owns fifteen other luxurious homes in the Golden Horseshoe, some of which he rents out for expensive parties and large social events.

In comparison, an ordinary “as is” one bedroom apartment in Niagara now rents for around \$1250/month, that is, \$15,000/year. Meanwhile, Niagara Region is notorious for its part-time, seasonal, non-permanent, minimum wage economy, so that someone working full-time, year-round, at minimum wage would be considered relatively well-employed, for his annual gross income would then be as much as \$31,200/year.

Nonetheless, according to government guidelines, the cost of our average one-bedroom apartment would be \$340/month, that is, \$4,080/year, beyond what he could securely afford, according to the recommended housing expenditure. Thus current housing prices condemn a large percentage of our local population to an insecure poverty-line existence.

Doug: As one who has worked a lot with our newcomer families of Syrian refugees, I can testify to the fact that over just the past four years since we welcomed our first family, rental rates have almost doubled! Where is the political and economic leadership in Niagara that will re-double efforts to ensure affordable housing for all? You may be pleased to know that the leaders of Westview Church and the Centre4Women are providing strong voices urging local politicians and community influencers to address this problem directly. Hopefully their work will bear good fruit.

Of course, housing affordability connects directly to income generation. What did the prophets have to say about the whole idea of “a fair wage” or “a living income”?

(Amos 8: 4-6): “Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?’”

Kevin: One of Ontario’s new slogans is, “Open for Business”. Just as, at the speedways, the announcer will say, ‘Gentlemen, start your engines’! So now, during the COVID era, businesses are positioning themselves to sprint forward. As part of a ‘COVID-19 Recovery Plan’, the Ontario government has passed a number of laws which not only remove many zoning and environmental checks regarding new housing developments, but also make it more difficult for concerned citizens to address these issues. The government had also proposed that statutory holidays in

Ontario be reduced from nine to three, although this policy idea was withdrawn due to pressure.

Meanwhile, 78% of Ontario's businesses have been found to be in violation of the Employment Standards Act. This is the law which regulates how employers treat their employees. Governments normally indicate that such regulations are such a low priority, that it is okay for employers to be self-regulating. In any case, the penalties for non-compliance are minimal, and any employee who stands up for their rights is likely to be fired and blacklisted.

Doug: I believe all of us in this church have lived as hard-working, honest people who looked out for ourselves and our families as best we could, and tried to help out others along the way. That's good, because, sadly, so many people on the 'lower rungs of the economic ladder' find barriers to climbing higher. A loving, just God cares about the rights of workers at all levels. And so should we.

And then there's the problem of materialism, of being driven by the culture of consumerism to always want more. Well, maybe we're old enough now to be able to settle for our pensions and a simpler lifestyle. But think of the pressure on our children and grandchildren! The prophet Micah detested the way people of his day were being influenced away from God.

(Micah 3: 5-6): "Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them..."

Kevin: Like the prophets of Israel and Judah, we may wonder where the social norms of our society come from, if not from God. While teaching about advertising in a business class some years ago, I realized that the majority of my students had spent the equivalent of a full year of their lives (365 days, 24 hours) watching television ads. Nowadays, with promotional materials embedded in social media and programming itself, it might well be a year-and-a-half of their lives.

In their book 'Manufacturing Consent', Professors Herman and Chomsky have explained how the rich and powerful use mass media to influence public opinion, as well as excluding or marginalizing ideas which do not conform to the views of corporate America, or privileged political groups. Social media itself is commonly an exercise in producing a uniformity of opinion.

Telling the truth remains dangerous in 2020, and successive Canadian governments have declined to introduce a 'whistle-blowers' protection bill. The result is that anyone who divulges facts at odds with the official or corporate

viewpoint in Canada is open to major reprisals. This has happened, for example, to employees at Marineland who have disclosed the mistreatment of marine animals at the tourist site.

Doug: Well, today Kevin and I have taken you from the dusty fields of ancient Israel to the gates of Marineland! We've hoped to offer some little windows into how the old truth-teachings of the prophets might be applied to contemporary issues. It's rather sad that generally in North America, preachers shy away from the prophets' behavioural demands about matters related to money and power and lifestyle of the rich and influential – what some call the 'evangelical white moral majority'. The emphasis is on personal enthusiasm in energetic worship and on realizing how faith will help you get richer or more secure or influential. Kindness and generosity are suggested as nice Christian virtues, but a life-long engagement with peace-and-justice-making is seen as something only a few radical people might do.

Yet the heart of religion, according to Jesus, is that we love all neighbours as we love ourselves. Our worship must be genuine and must always inspire us in how to serve God better in a world that's too often so dark and unkind to too many people.

(Micah 6: 6-8): "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 my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Kevin: In this passage, the prophet Micah sums up the teaching of his prophetic brethren. For example, his predecessor Amos had written (5:24): 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-rolling stream.' Centuries later, Jesus quoted another prophet Hosea during his controversy with the Pharisees: 'For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.' (Hosea 6:6)

All these prophets are standing firmly against 'big religion' which has ties to the political and economic establishment. Micah is saying that your sacrifices and burnt offerings, even the sacrifice of one's first-born son, will not save you, if you turn away from justice and righteousness. Nor will your standing among the priests and princes of the state religion help you. Even Jerusalem itself will fall to enemies, if it does not repent of its wickedness.

Rather than dramatic public demonstrations of religiosity, God asks for a personal commitment to him and his ways. As Micah puts it, all that God requires of us is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

May the message of prophets, such as Amos, Hosea, Micah, and our Lord Jesus himself, continue to speak to us regarding justice, kindness, and obedience today. AMEN.

Doug: Yes, real honest God-honouring religion is not just sentiment. It's not just lifestyle. It's love in action, seeking where the neighbour most needs help, and doing something life-giving to make a real difference. Listen to the way the words of our hymn of response remind us of what we do through MCC and MDS and other kinds of outreach work. Let's never fail in our efforts to grow in faithfulness with compassion. Let's keep walking toward God, always looking to help someone else along the way, in Jesus' name.

Hymn of Response: "What does the Lord require" [HWB #409]

*What does the Lord require for praise and offering?
What sacrifice, desire, or tribute bid you bring?
Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.*

*People of earth, give ear! Should you not justice know?
Will God your pleading hear, while crime and cruelty grow?
Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.*

*Still down the ages ring the prophet's stern commands.
To merchant, worker, king, he brings God's high demands.
Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.*

*How shall our life fulfill God's law so hard and high?
Let Christ endue our will with grace to fortify.
Then justly, in mercy, we'll humbly walk with God.*

Benediction: Ephesians 3:17-19 [Doug Schulz]

(May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Sending Hymn: "Spirit of the Living God" [VU #376]

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the living God, move among us all;
make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love:
humble, caring, selfless, sharing.
Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love.*