

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
22 August 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“Free to Be:
A People Who Partner with Others in Ministry
(An Exploration of our Local, Ecumenical, and Interfaith Partnerships)***

Twelfth sermon in the 14-week summer series: *Free to Be*

*Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 25:42-45; Luke 4:16-21;
Philippians 4:1-3; 1 Corinthians 3:4-9*

New Revised Standard Version

It is great to be Baptist!
But...brace yourself...Baptists
are not the end all be all.

Throughout our *Free to Be* series this summer we've learned that Baptists are free to do our own thing as we feel the Spirit leading us – both as individuals and as a congregation, but we've also affirmed that there is more we can together than we can do on our own. Who we choose to partner with in ministry matters. Where we have weaknesses, others have strengths. Where others have a need, we might just have the right gifts at the right time to meet that need.

The Scriptures for today all speak of a call to do justice and serve the world in very practical and hands-on ways that meet basic humanitarian needs, while also emphasizing that it takes many people and partnerships to

fulfill this calling, including partnership with God.

The prophet Micah asks a crucial question of the people of Israel in the midst of injustice and violence in 8th-century B.C.E. Judean society, a society where the powerful are continually oppressing the weak; the covenant relationship between Israel and God has been very strained. And so Micah, a prophet speaking as the mouthpiece of God, asks some questions that point to what the people of Israel are currently doing to try to repair their strained relationship – they are trying to worship in extravagant ways, in hopes (perhaps) to win over God's affections. It seems over-the-top doesn't it? Offering thousands of rams, tens of thousands of rivers of oil, giving one's firstborn? All to try to make up for sins, or mistakes, or grievances and harm that the

Israelite people have caused others. It's quite striking language – because even if such extravagant sacrifices were the solution to making amends and reconciling with God – very few would be able to achieve that, if any. I mean, who has thousands of rams just sitting around?

That's why Micah offers up a different question: What does *the Lord* require of you?

As Jim Yang Kim points out in an article for the World Council of Churches, there is a decided shift from first person (“I”) language in verses 6 and 7 to third person (“the Lord”) language in verse 8. Instead of focusing on what *I* think the Lord requires of *me*, Micah is asking me to listen to what *the Lord* is actually saying. It's not about “me/I” at all. Kim points out that often we believe sacrificial worship begins with ourselves (our gifts and our goodness), but really, it ought to begin with God. It's not about responding to “our will,” but “God's will,” and what is God's will? Well, to put it bluntly – “instead of ‘material commodity,’ God wants faithful

relationships and reliable solidarity [with others].”¹

The first two commands in verse 8, doing justice and loving kindness, stand at the center of Israel's faith tradition – they summarize the greatest commandment to love God and love neighbor (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Mark 12:28-31; Matt. 22:37-40). The third command is to walk humbly. But this doesn't mean self-abasement, says Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann; to walk humbly is the opposite of walking proudly or with arrogance, self-sufficiency, complete autonomy or independence.² Walking humbly means to pay attention to others. To not walk alone. Because only other people can keep us humble!

And perhaps this gives a double meaning to what Micah implies when he says, “Walk humbly with your God.” This walking companion is not just God's closeness to us through a spiritual presence, but a tangible presence that is made real to us in our human companions on

¹ Jin Yang Kim, “Micah 6:1-8 “What Does God Expect of You? A Pilgrimage of Reconciliation with God and with Our Neighbor” *The World Council of Churches*. Accessed on August 22, 2021 at [https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/micah-](https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/micah-61-8-what-does-god-expect-of-you-a-pilgrimage-of-reconciliation-with-god-and-with-our-neighbor-by-jin-yang-kim)

61-8-what-does-god-expect-of-you-a-pilgrimage-of-reconciliation-with-god-and-with-our-neighbor-by-jin-yang-kim.

² Walter Brueggemann, “Walk Humbly with Your God, Micah 6:8,” *Journal for Preachers*, 33/4 (2010), p. 16.

the journey. To walk with God is to walk with one another.

Micah 6 is clear: loving neighbor is not about a feeling that we get when we worship, it's about an action we do when we are out in the world righting wrongs. Yang concludes his article with: "In his book, *Man Is Not Alone*, Abraham Joshua Heschel explained the mutual relationship between worship experience and Micah's question, 'What does God expect of you?' in the following way: "*Religion is for God's sake. The human side of religion, its creeds, rituals and institutions, is a way rather than the goal. The goal is 'to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.'* When the human side of religion becomes the goal, injustice becomes a way."³

That's a meaty quote that you can chew on for days. What's ironic is that our human side of religion tends to focus on God more than it does other *humans*! (Who are, of course, created in God's image.)

This is where Matthew 25 comes in. Jesus states clearly

and without apology or nuance: when there are human needs before us – hunger, thirst, a stranger/foreigner, unclothed, unhoused, sick, imprisoned – when those human needs are before us and we do not meet those human needs – then we are not meeting Jesus' needs. Until we see the face of Jesus in every person who is suffering or oppressed, including ourselves, then we do not know the *fullness* of Jesus, and we are not *fully* following in his way.

This is a tough passage because it feels like an impossible standard. And it is. You and I cannot meet every single need of every single person on this planet. But we can meet someone's need. I always think of this passage when I want to get out of helping someone or when I try to justify to myself why it's not my responsibility to help someone. Sometimes when a person presents a need to me I question their motivations or wonder – well, what *really* is their story? Do they need help or are they just pulling my leg? Am I just perpetuating a cycle of dependence? But the thing is – these questions only do two things: they delay help and they

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 132.

give me an excuse to ignore Matthew 25. My questions do not house anyone or feed anyone or quench thirst. There are times when meeting immediate needs is what we are called to do without questions about how worthy the person is or isn't; if they say they are hungry...can we believe them and feed them?

And besides, contrary to our culture of independence in this country, the Bible teaches us time and time again that we are to be *dependent* on one another. Dependence is a key value of following in the way of Jesus, as is meeting immediate needs as they present themselves. We need Matthew 25 to remind us of the urgency of human need and how Christ, the image of God, is seen and reflected in every human need *and* in every human's response to human need.

That said, we need Luke 4 to remind us that it is not just meeting urgent, in-the-moment needs that matters. Creating systems of change that are lasting and that promote just opportunities for all are imperative too. In Jesus' first public sermon in Luke he chooses a text from Isaiah about "bringing good news to the

poor, releasing the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free." His first sermon was not "*believe in me as the Son of God and you'll go to heaven*" or "*become a Christian and you'll be 'good with God,'*" Jesus first sermon really had nothing to do with belief in him, but everything to do with putting into action the prophetic tradition which he came to fulfill: God's desire for the suffering and oppressed to be freed and healed and restored. Jesus rolls up the scroll and says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in *your* hearing." And because the people know that Jesus is talking about *them* fulfilling this, and not *him* fulfilling it, they get really angry and try to throw him off of a cliff.

Perhaps a lesson for us in Luke 4 is to listen to the statements or claims that make us really angry. Because if something causes us to be really angry – maybe it's because it's speaking to something deep within us that feels uncomfortable, or maybe like a judgment against us and so we don't want to hear it because it means we have to rethink something we hold dear or that we just don't have the energy to rethink because it

means our lives might need to change. In these situations, anger is an understandable response.

But curiously, in this Luke 4 passage, Jesus walks through the angry mob and goes on his way. And so I wonder what it would be like for us, in those moments of anger – particularly around an area of justice where we don't understand why someone is suffering or why they are oppressed – I wonder what it would look like for us, in our anger, to not run and throw that issue or group of people off a cliff (metaphorically speaking of course) – to not “write them off” – but rather to stay there in our anger long enough for Jesus to pass through it and keep walking...and for us to follow him in curiosity. If what is making us angry – isn't making Jesus or other Jesus' followers angry, then why is that? What are we not seeing that they might be seeing?

In Philippians, Paul speaks to the importance of partnerships in ministry. He asks for help for Euodia and Syntyche because they are women who have been helping him, and he names Clement and other co-workers too – they have all struggled for

the gospel and need support as well.

This passage reminds us that we can't do ministry alone. Just as we saw last week that Jesus didn't do ministry alone (he surrounded himself with at least 12 disciples and commissions 70 more to go two by two), and just as we heard Paul mentioning his shared ministry with Barnabus and then Silas, Paul is not shy about pointing out his partners in ministry, or asking for financial support for them by churches, or asking for prayers for them. Perhaps this is a model for us as a church. Which partners do we do the nitty-gritty work of ministry with? Which ones do we support financially? Which ones do we pray for? (Or some combination of the three.)

And in our final passage for today, 1 Corinthians 3, we are reminded that we are not always going to be able to see the tangible results of our labor. Even if Calvary plants a seed and one of our partners waters it or adds to it (or vice versa) – it is *God* who does the growing and the growth.

Of course, human effort matters. A lot. Scripture supports that. We do not just sit and pray for a

miracle. We allow God to use us to be the miracle that the world needs. But I think it's important to honor that mysterious ingredient of God's presence and power that we cannot control, that often surprises us with generosity and opportunity. It's quite amazing to realize that God chooses *us*, mere mortals, to work in and through to effect change in the world. God could have chosen a magic wand – abracadabra – and perhaps some of us wish God would choose that method of healing and restoration and justice. But if everything was fixed with the wave of a magic wand, none of us would be transformed in the process, would we? As we work to take apart systems that are serving some but not all so that there is space for new, more just and equitable systems to be created – or as we create space in our schedule to help someone out who is having a rough day – we are making space in our lives (in our hearts) for God's presence to work miracles – most of which we'll probably never see the fruit of. Such is faith.

As Paul says to the church at Corinth – just as the one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, even though they have different roles,

so it is with the church and our partners.

Ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, local and mission partnerships – these are some of the most powerful ways we join together to do justice and love kindness and make a difference in the world. *Ecumenical* is a fancy word that means partnership or cooperation among different churches or entities of the Christian faith. Whereas *inter-faith* means partnership or cooperation with individuals or groups of people from non-Christian faith(s) or no faith even.

The front of your Order of Worship has a sampling of some the partners that we are engaged with here at Calvary:

Family Promise forms relationships with families at risk of/or experiencing homelessness by providing shelter, meals, and a spectrum of supportive services as they obtain permanent stability.

Habitat for Humanity makes home ownership attainable for people who otherwise would not have the means to make a down payment on a home but can put in labor towards that goal.

“Sweat equity” is what they call it. **Kentucky Circle Village**

provides insanely affordable rent for seniors, so that they have safe and stable housing in a community with other seniors, which helps prevent loneliness.

Jewish Family Service, just down the street, provides comprehensive services to vulnerable individuals and families, including Aging Care and Connections, Disability Programs, Employment Support, Housing Stability, Food Security, and Mental Health Counseling.

Then there's the **Interfaith Alliance of Colorado**, which works to educate and advocate for a number of legislative measures and policies around those who are vulnerable in our society, just as **Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence** works on legislation related to gun safety, background checks, safe gun storage, and mental health measures. The **Interfaith Alliance of Colorado** speaks out about hate crimes and religious freedom issues for people of all faiths, in the same way that the **Baptist Joint Committee** does so on the national level. And the **Interfaith Alliance of Colorado** advocates for the rights of the LGBTQ+

community, in a similar way that AWAB, the **Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists**, works to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion in churches.

Soul 2 Soul Sisters works to dismantle systemic racism through educational "Facing Racism" cohorts, education related to ballot measures around reproductive rights and voting rights, supporting black women through multi-layered healing opportunities, and creating avenues for reparations for those who identify as white to give money to concretely make a difference for how the enslavement of black people has led to generations upon generations of inequalities and injustices for black Americans. Just as their work is about helping us see the big picture of racism in our history and systems and how our individual actions can make a difference, Calvary's partnership with **New Hope Baptist Church**, supported by the **New Baptist Covenant** which is all about building bridges between predominately white and black congregations – seeks to build relationships, on a local level, with people of different races.

One partnership that is not on your Order of Worship cover,

but that we support through car donation is **Driven2Donate**, which helps the non-profit, **Step Denver** – a residential recovery program that helps men with no resources and nowhere else to turn. Their addiction recovery program is centered around the four pillars of sobriety, work, accountability, and community.

Through the years, Calvary has partnered intentionally with other organizations doing really worthy and important work – The Denver Inner City Parish, Metro Caring, the Colorado Council of Churches, Ecumenical Refugee and Immigration Services (ERIS), just to name a few, and through trips and financial gifts to places like Rainbow Acres – a ranch that employs people with varying mental and physical abilities as “ranchers.”

In any given year, we may deepen a partnership, or step back from a partnership, or maintain a partnership – for a whole host of reasons. There are so many worthy organizations to give to and to partner with – and we can’t be involved with them all – so we try to see where there is interest and passion in the congregation right now – and we work from that place. It’s about following the Spirit’s

leading in discerning what partners in ministry are best for us right now, in this season of our church’s life. What are the gifts and skills in our congregation members, and *of those, who* is ready and willing to serve? And equally, if not more importantly, what are the needs in our community and in our world? And can we step up to the plate to take a swing at being part of a solution, rather than sitting on the sidelines and lamenting the problem?

Don’t get me wrong; there are times for deep lament. The past two weeks have been full of lament as we’ve watched in horror as Afghan people cling to United States planes on runways, and as the Taliban swiftly and forcefully has taken over the country, in what is already being called an incredible and tragic miscalculation on the part of our President and his administration. I cannot speak to military strategy and what the right or wrong way for United States troops to leave Afghanistan is or was (or whether or not we should have had forces there so long or at all) or why the Afghan military was not prepared for the force of the Taliban. But what I can speak to is the humanitarian crisis we

now face as the Afghan people flee and fight for their lives. We will need to welcome thousands and thousands of Afghan refugees, and other countries will too. And we will need to meet not just their basic needs – but their emotional and spiritual and psychological needs.

And this is not too different from the care we must give veterans. I’ve heard from a wave of veterans this week, from Afghanistan and Iraq and even Vietnam – who are having traumatic flashbacks from their experiences. And there are families who lost loved ones in Afghanistan over the last 20 years that are now left with an intensifying grief, and women and men who live with physical and emotional wounds from serving in Afghanistan the last 20 years – it has just been a very, very raw two weeks, hasn’t it?

In such a situation – what is the role of the church? What do we do? Well, we can keep a lookout for Afghan refugees that land in Denver and we can work with organizations that are already helping refugees from all over the world. *The Denver Post* ran

an article highlighting organizations like the African Community Center of Denver and the International Rescue Committee of Denver – both of which work on resettling refugees from all over the world, all the time. From giving money, to making donation kits including essential personal and home items, to tutoring kids, and being paired with a family to help them get oriented – there are many ways to be involved.⁴

Or you can donate or volunteer with an organization that helps Veterans like Volunteers of America which is a faith-based non-profit dedicated to helping vulnerable Coloradans; they have a whole Veteran services branch offering a number of services. Or research a similar organization that you know about. Or maybe just check in with any veteran you know – and their family – or any refugee and their family – and see how they are doing. Weeks like this can bring back traumatic memories for many and just letting people know you are there makes a difference.

Or you can look for a way to support Muslim organizations in

⁴ Elizabeth Hernandez, “How you can help Afghan refugees headed to Colorado,” *The Denver Post* (August 19, 2021), accessed on August 22, 2021 at

<https://www.denverpost.com/2021/08/19/afghan-refugees-colorado-how-to-help/>.

Colorado, because when refugees come to us from Muslim countries, often hate crimes against Muslims increase. The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, one of Calvary's interfaith partners, can provide guidance in this area.

I believe that one way change happens in our world is that when we feel moved or grieved or horrified by tragic events in our country or around the world – we take action. As a Baptist and as a Christian and just as a human being, we are called to take action to show people that we see them, we hear them, and they matter. Sometimes this action may come through your church – but often times it will come through your own initiative. No one church can be involved in every issue or matter, but collectively – all of us together can make a difference in many areas, so that the prayer *“thy kin-dom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven”* becomes a reality.

If you care about an issue or organization, it's okay to be the “hands and feet of Jesus” out in the world and volunteer with that group and give to that group without it being something that Calvary officially becomes a partner with or gives money to.

Actually, that is the hope of the church! That we are out serving in the world as Jesus leads us.

But if you are sensing that there is an issue or cause or organization that you think we, as a church, should seriously consider partnering with – talk to others at church or put something in the newsletter to see if others are interested in joining you; that's a good way to gauge if it should just be your thing or Calvary's thing. Both kinds of partnerships are needed and important.

Perhaps more than any other of our sermons in this series, this topic of partnerships with other entities that are not Baptist, is what is most needed for spreading the love of God and our vision of being “Open to All, Closed to None.” Just yesterday, at the South by Southeast Festival in Bible Park, Pastor Alice and myself heard several people say – “wow, a Baptist church that is inclusive!” Or – “y'all are the only church that is here; that's cool that you care about the community.” Or “Oh yeah, I know your church because I voted there – or – I got vaccinated there.” One couple even shared that they were former neighbors of Bettie and

Larry Loughhead (Larry is a former Senior Pastor at Calvary for those of you who are new) and this couple inquired as to how the Loughhead kids and grandkids were doing; they remembered what amazing neighbors Bettie and Larry were to them – helping them out with their children when they were young, nevermind that this family was Jewish and would never come to Calvary. Not surprisingly, the Loughheads were just good neighbors. And Bettie continued to send them a holiday letter from the East Coast up until she died.

All that to say – being out in the community matters – in whatever ways you can be. You may not be in a place in your life to give a lot of time or a lot of money to much because your own life circumstances and stresses are all-consuming. But I will say, that when our lives get all-consuming with our own stuff, sometimes the best thing we can do is to look outside of ourselves and our own families (and church family) and do something for someone else – no act is too small. A simple favor for someone who is struggling, a small donation to an organization that is working

at addressing the “huge” complex issues of our day, an hour of time a week or a month volunteering. You, my friends, are *Free to Be*, the hands and feet of Jesus – in whatever ways you can.

We are blessed to not be in this work alone. And in the spirit of partnership, and in honoring the wisdom of other faith traditions, I'll close by sharing two of the values that guide our partner, Jewish Family Service:⁵

Tikkun Olam – the obligation to make the world a better place.

Tikkun HaLev – the act of mending the heart.

As we mend hearts, may our hearts be mended too. Something tells me that's how God created this partnership thing to work in the first place.

Amen.

⁵ Jewish Family Service website, accessed on August 22, 2021 at <https://www.jewishfamilyservice.org/about>.