

A Kaleidoscopic Vision

Micah 6:1-8

While conducting experiments on polarity in the early 19C, Scotsman Sir David Brewster noted that mirrors, set at thirty degree angles, created a near-infinite reflection image. He placed mirrors in a tube with brightly colored beads in the base, and gave us one of the best loved and enduring inventions of optical research. From child's toy to collector's item, the kaleidoscope has charmed young and old ever since then. Beads, buttons, pieces of glass or colored liquid reflected off the mirrors become a flower unfolding in fast forward motion or a supernova bursting in the heavens.

A website called *Kaleidoscope Heaven* offers a near-infinite variety (and price!) of kaleidoscopes. One scope called *Wedding* allows two people, looking from each end, to see an entirely different view of the same thing. A comment upon the designer's marital well-being? Perhaps, a pointed yet humorous reminder that any one of us can look at, or hear, the exact same thing only to find ourselves at polar opposites of the one we love?

Accordingly to Micah's account, something is terribly wrong in the relationship between the Lord God and the people of Israel. But it's not the problem of the two people looking at the same thing and seeing something completely different. The problem is one partner in this relationship is not even looking! God looks for hearts and minds and souls turned towards the heart of God but sees only shards of ill-gotten gain, distorted pieces of justice, broken business promises. Israel has forgotten there's anything to look at, except its own self interest. And, so dependence on military might, unethical practices, political corruption and racketeering smear the lens. Lives of exploited women and children, domestic abuse, and the oppression of the weak and the stranger all but cloud the light. Perhaps it takes a prophet's poetry to hear the depth of God's agony: ***O, my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?***

To get their attention, God puts, like bright beads in a kaleidoscope, the story of Israel's creation: ***"I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery."*** Or the bead of leaders (Moses, Aaron and Miriam) to capture the people's memory and delight at what is theirs to see. God sets, like so many colored objects in the scope the assurance of blessing and promise. Look at all this beauty! But when called upon to look, the people's rejoinder to blessing is bargaining; the retort to promise is pay-off: ***"Shall I come before the Lord with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"*** So it goes when a people, a community, a nation, (a congregation?) has, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, *"forgotten its exodus memory, when their originating story is forfeited."* The people will even sacrifice their own flesh and blood. ***"Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"*** Israel offers everything but what God longs for: loving, obedient hearts and minds. Not a sacrifice of something outside but rather a yielding of being to God, to God's way, to God's vision.

A Midrash proverb says only those commandments and laws which are written down must we remember. This morning's passage, written down and engraved in the minds/hearts of many (did you know that Micah 6:8 is engraved above the entrance to the religion alcove in the Library of Congress?) is one we continually forget. How short our memory – how long is God's. Oh, how like us to forget. How like this God to remind us that all we need to know in order to be faithful and to be human is already here. ***"He has told you, O mortal, what is good:***

and what does the Lord require of you? Only this: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” How like this God not to want quality of things but quality of life.

Thankfully, this passage does not deal with the guilt of humankind. It does not deal with the “problem” whether we can do what God requires. We are not given spiritual or moral virtues to fulfill. And are you really interested in, excited about doing three more “things”? Rather, this passage presents us with a “transformative summons” - three dimensions of faithfulness, each of which depends on the other, each reinforced by the other two – just like the mirrors in a kaleidoscope.

The mirror of “doing justice”

There are various and conflicting understandings of justice. Walter Brueggemann offers this one: *Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom and to return it to them.*

He tells this story: “A very proper lady went to a tea shop. Sitting at a table for two, she ordered a pot of tea, and prepared to eat some cookies she had in her purse. The tea shop was crowded, and a man took the other chair and also ordered tea. As she began to read her paper, she took a cookie from the package. She noticed that the man across from her also took a cookie from the package. This upset her but she ignored it and kept reading. After a while, she took another cookie. And so did he. Unnerved by this, she glared at the man. He reached for the fifth and last cookie, smiled and offered her half of it. She was indignant. Paying her money with a huff and leaving in a great hurry, she was enraged by the man’s presumptuous behavior. At the bus stop just outside, she opened her purse to get money for her fare. It was then she saw, much to her distress, that in her purse was her package of cookies – unopened.”¹ Sometimes, we possess things that do not really belong to us for such a long time, we come to think they are ours. Justice, Brueggemann declares, concerns precisely a right reading of social reality, of social power, and of social goods. To “act justly” is not to admire justice or engage in academic discussion of it. Rather *justice is to sort out what belongs to whom and to return it to them.*

And the range of justice is as varied as the range of human relations, as infinite as shapes in a kaleidoscope. What will be the shape of our life in worship, pastoral care, education, and mission as we “*sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them*”? How will “acting justly” transform our ways of being and doing to form hope for those of us here, and those of us beyond these walls?

The mirror of “loving kindness”

Not mere human emotion or fuzzy feeling, “to love tenderly”, as in one translation, is to enter into relationships of abiding solidarity. Solidarity often used in a political sense is like the steadfast and loyal love that family members have for one another. You know, the “When you’re talking to her, you’re talking to me” kind of love. There’s a characteristic of passion and freedom in this “mirror”. The whole person is engaged – heart, mind, will – in making full-bodied commitments **AND** keeping them. For Sharon Parks, professor of Religion and Psychology at Harvard Divinity, to love tenderly, to be in solidarity with another, is “*embodied by a network of belonging.*”

“One day while shopping at the supermarket, I heard a crash and turned around to see that a little girl of about 9 years had cut an aisle corner a bit too sharp, sending bottles of carefully displayed Perrier into a watery mess of broken glass. The little girl stood nearby with

her mother, looking distressed while store personnel mopped up. After all was cleaned, mother and daughter were left alone. Just as the girl began telling what happened, the mother spontaneously picked her up in a strong embrace.”²

When life comes apart, when assumptions and dreams defeat us, we need to be held, like the embrace of the mother. “Loving tenderly” creates a place where we can be held and belong, and then, patiently, over time, challenges us to embrace an enlarged faith and humanity. What will be the shape of our life in worship, pastoral care, education and mission as we “love tenderly”, as we create a *network of belonging*, form community, not just for ourselves and those we know, but for the wider community which we are called to see? And what will be your role?

The mirror of “walking humbly with your God”

“To walk” is to live in a certain way. In concert with the other sides of this transformative summons, the prophet reminds us to live in a certain way with God: humbly. “Wisely and carefully, attentively,” in the words of one translation. “To walk with God” is to live in diligent, intimate fellowship with God. “*The strength of a person consists in finding out which way God is going, and going that way too,*” Henry Ward Beecher said. That’s more like it! To walk humbly with God is to see things – everything, everyone, our very own selves - through God’s eyes, to be in step with the God of history and memory, of blessing and of possibility. To walk humbly is not a call for self-effacement. Shyness or silence in the face of the ethical/moral questions of this age are not part of the vision. Living “in this way” requires something of us. The writer of the gospel according to John sings a reminder that we walk in strength with God in as much as God walks with us: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*”

What difference will attention, and intention, to our life in God give to worship, pastoral care, education and mission here at Westminster? How will it shape our programming, administration, our stewardship? And what form will it take in your personal and public life?

Like mirrors set at angles to one another, these three dimensions – doing justly, loving tenderly, living attentively – create near-infinite possibilities of transformed life and faith. The bright history of this congregation, the uniqueness of our individual lives, our hopes and yes, our own broken dreams and forgetful selves, like so many beads in the base of a kaleidoscope, bounce off and back to create countless beautiful forms to see, to celebrate, to share.

Kaleidoscope meaning **beautiful** + **shape** (form) + **watcher** (to see). The poet Micah reminds us of God’s standing invitation to look again and to see countless forms for worship, education, mission and care as shaped by God’s Spirit, as seen from God’s eye. And then to glimpse the kaleidoscopic vision of the Risen One who speaks in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eyes what in God’s eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places;
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.*³

- 1 To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly by Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, Thomas H. Groome (Paulist Press, 1986)
- 2 Ibid
- 3 “Inversnaid” Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins (Penguin Books, 1988)