

# WHAT NEEDS TO BE CHANGED

A Sermon Delivered for Yom Kippur  
Sunday, September 27, 2009  
First Parish in Needham  
The Rev. John Buehrens

READING

Micah 6:6-8

The reading is taken from the Hebrew Bible, from the prophet Micah, and in this translation the term 'HaShem' is used in place of the sacred and unpronounceable name of the One who breathed each being of Creation into existence.

With what shall I come before the HaShem, and bow myself before the Holy on high?  
Shall I come before the Holy with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the HaShem be pleased with thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my first born for my transgression,  
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

It has been told you, O mortal, what is good: and what HaShem requires of you:  
Only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with what you call Holy.

There is a classic Jewish story told about a rabbi who, in the middle of the solemn liturgy on Yom Kippur, starts thinking about all his own moral imperfections, especially when contrasted with the grandeur and goodness of God. Suddenly he turns toward the sacred Ark and cries out, "O God, you are everything! And I . . . my learning, my experience, they have meant nothing! And I am nothing!" Everyone who hears him is moved by his humility. Soon the cantor joins in. Despite his gift of song, compared with the One who is enthroned on the praises of all his people, "I am nothing!" he chants. The whole congregation joins in. Finally, from the very back of the synagogue, the *shammash*, the janitor, comes forward and joins the clergy up on the *bima*, bowing down before the Ark and crying out, "I am nothing." Until the cantor and the rabbi look at one another and say, "Look who's up here thinking that he's nothing!"

Well, friends, no one here is nothing. None of us is perfect, God knows. But sound religion teaches that each of us is a child of God, worthy of respect, love, and forgiveness. The human tragedy is that so often we act as though that were not true. And then we may treat one another with the same disdain and abuse that we secretly harbor for ourselves.

In his little book, *How Good Do We Have to Be?*, Rabbi Harold Kushner says that when he was a child he was taught that Yom Kippur was about atoning for all the things done to hurt other people before atoning for offenses against God, because God only forgives us when we have forgiven others. He then writes: “As I have grown older, I have come to suspect that the first half of that teaching is still valid, but the second half may have it wrong. I [now] think we have to be forgiven first. We have to learn what it feels like to admit our mistakes and limitations and find out how wonderful it is not be rejected for being less than perfect. Once we have that experience, we can offer acceptance to the less-than-perfect people” around us. And then join with them to help make this less-than-perfect world more just and kind and accepting.

This fall marks an important anniversary for me. It’s now forty years since I entered Divinity School. And in the Bible, you know, forty is almost a symbol for a long, long time – the time needed for one whole generation to pass away and for another one to arise. Some of you have heard me describe how I first felt the call to ministry. How, in my senior year in college, after Dr. King was shot and killed, I entered a Unitarian church for the very first time. Where I saw inscribed on a plaque the words of Micah: “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” – a good motto for a non-creedal church.

This summer I finished writing a book about “the promise of progressive religion” for America. And when I turned to think about my next writing project, I briefly considered doing one called *What Was Required: A Memoir of Ministry*. Because it occurred to me that my own spiritual life, like many in ministry, has almost followed Micah’s sequence. When I started out, my calling was all about seeking justice. My ministry was shaped by congregations in Tennessee and Texas that shared my sense of urgency for justice. That hasn’t ended; not by any means. But in my middle years, first in New York City and then as President of our denomination, I think I was striving equally hard just to cultivate kindness. Perhaps with just as little success or perfection –

but I wanted to be not just a scholar or organizer, but also a pastor, attentive to others in their hurts and needs, helping people – including my fellow clergy – who had been hurt by bad religion, nonetheless to build up the value of truly caring, compassionate religious community in an often greedy and needy world. And this too hasn't ended. But even before I came to Needham seven years ago, to the smallest congregation I'd ever served, I think a third phase had begun in me.

Humility is not about being nothing. Two weeks ago I preached a sermon called "Non-Zero." Some of you heard it. I said that when religion works well in people's lives, it doesn't promote zero-sum conflicts between groups, although God knows religion can get caught up in them. Rather it reminds people to transcend revenge and self-interest and seek non-zero sum solutions, promoting a larger common good and a better future. And just to finish reviewing the bidding -- as they'd say in bridge -- last week Molly eloquently called on us to echo the Hebrew prophets by answering the inner call of the spirit and the need for community by saying as they did, "*Hineni*"; that is, "Here I am, fully present, expectant, ready to serve."

For it's easy to give a litany of all the things out there, in the world, in politics, in economics, in other people and other religions that we think need to be changed. And surely, God also knows, we need change to turn away from nuclear weapons and violent solutions; to fight global climate change; to move toward healthcare for all; away from bigotry and toward equal marriage and mutual acceptance; away from zero-sum politics and toward more bipartisan solutions; away from fundamentalisms of both the right and the left, and toward civility and dialogue. But it is also far too easy and smug to assume that there's nothing that needs to be changed inside us. When in fact there is.

America's greatest public theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was probably Reinhold Niebuhr – whose consistent warnings against self-righteousness led him to admonish liberal pacifists in the 1930s that wishful thinking would not be enough to deal with the rise of Hitler and other totalitarians. Then, even before World War II, he warned America that in defeating the Axis, the greatest danger we'd face would be an excessive, arrogant belief in American goodness and power. Niebuhr supported the civil rights movement and rejected the misguided war in Vietnam. He was

not always right. But like the prophets that the Bible bothered to remember by name, rather than the nameless false prophets who cried peace, peace, when there was no peace – he was often vindicated by history.

One summer Sunday out in Ware, Massachusetts, where he had a country house, and sometimes preached in the little interdenominational chapel, Niebuhr first uttered a simple, profound prayer: for “the grace to accept with serenity those things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” Copied down by a friend, circulated in publications to the Armed Forces, and adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous as its mantra, the Serenity Prayer, as his daughter pointed out in a book a few years ago, was not just about personal issues. It was also about our shared life, about the wisdom to decide when to show courage and when to seek serenity. And if there is a one sentence version of today’s sermon it might be this: True wisdom about how to know the difference is a lot like authentic humility.

Western culture itself derives from the combination of Greek philosophy and biblical prophecy. But it has not been easy to find what Athens has to do with Jerusalem. Often we privilege the former, we who are educated. We think that our knowledge and critical thinking is what we should rely upon. We forget that Socrates himself said that his only claim to wisdom depended on knowing that he was the most ignorant man in Athens. And so are you, learned friends, and I. The life we share is one of living in the questions. The challenge is to make them good ones.

“What do Unitarian Universalists have most in common?” a parishioner once asked his minister. “Oh, I don’t know,” my colleague replied. “Perhaps it’s that we’re all inclined to be skeptics!” “I don’t believe that!” replied the person to the parson.

So what needs to be changed? In us, that is. Each of us will have a different answer, of course. Because that’s who we are: individuals. But perhaps we ought to forgive one another that fact: that we are separate moral agents, each of us. Because, you know, if you want to make change, say, in your family, that’s where you have to start: with *you*; with the only soul over which you have any control, which is NOT that of your spouse, child, parent, or sibling, or of anyone else.

But it's also true that our lives are intertwined. Which is why when Jews gather in synagogue on Yom Kippur, one of the harder parts of the liturgy for individualists to accept is that it is NOT about how any one individual sinned. Quite the contrary; rather it is about collective failings. The confessions of sin are in the plural: "We murdered. . . We stole. . . We lied. . ." And you know what, as much as we want to deny it, it's all true, because all our lives are involved in the common life. We dropped the bombs from drones in Afghanistan that killed innocent civilians; we may not be Bernie Madoff, but we sought, just like him to make as much as we could from a loosely-regulated investment economy while we could; we cooked the planet; and we have each told ourselves, "But I had nothing to do with that . . ." And in that, each of us has simply lied.

"Denial," as they say in both social justice work and AA, "is not a river in Egypt." It's a defense. So as a justice-seeker, as a pastor, and as one as imperfect as yourselves in seeking any humility, all I can tell you is this: We are in this together. It is our pride, our resistance to that humility, that most keeps us away from deeper wisdom. This is true both in our politics and in our personal lives. And it is true even here in our shared effort to be a more authentic spiritual community together.

I've seen too many of us deny any need for spiritual or practical help, when it's clearly needed. I've tried to break through your defenses often with my own tears. Forgive me for that, friends. There is far more to be said about all of this than can be said this morning. So forgive that, too. But before the fabled Book of Life closes tomorrow night, I do ask you to do three things: First, ask yourself first: "What turning in my own life do *I* need help with? Perhaps this deep question, which is a kind of prayer, may not be answered instantly; maybe not even in a whole year ahead. But ponder what you need; because you are worthy of respect, love, help, and forgiveness for your limitations and imperfections. You deserve to live more fully! You are not a nothing!

And then ask yourself, "What further kindness can I show, perhaps through this my admittedly imperfect religious community, to make this a kinder, more generous, and more caring world?" "I am only one," said a great Unitarian of an earlier era, "but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." What could that one thing be today? Tomorrow? In this year?

And finally I would ask you to choose *one* cause of social justice to work on in this coming year. Not twenty-seven! You aren't that powerful! Rather just one that has a claim on your conscience; where you say *Here I am!* ready to ask critical questions and then to formulate a better strategy. Where you choose or form a group to express your concerns, and do what you can, offer input, attend the meetings, if possible, speak in humility, listen likewise, and yet still stay committed. At least for the year – while sharing with the rest of us – again, if possible, in a mode of humility – the hopes that you have to share with us, not expecting us to share them all with you, but only that we will join you in something like the prayer with which I'll ask us to close today's worship; with the words that Reinhold Niebuhr spoke that summer Sunday 75 years ago this year:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
courage to change the things that should be changed,  
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

\*Hymn 120  
Benediction

Turn Back

Old 124<sup>th</sup>

**G**o out into the world in peace  
Have courage  
Hold on to what is good  
Return to no person evil for evil  
Strengthen the faint-hearted  
Support the weak  
Help the suffering  
Honor all beings. *-First Parish Benediction*