

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
November 21, 2004

“WHAT IS A GOOD LIFE?”

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”
~Micah 6:8

Earlier this week I was reminded that on November 17 in 1558 Queen Elizabeth I acceded to the English throne upon the death of her sister, Queen Mary. She reigned for 45 years, one of the great eras in English history. Near the end of her reign, she said to her subjects: “Though God hath raised me high, yet this I count the glory of my crown: that I have reigned with your loves.”

Despite the dark events of war and religious murders, Elizabeth's reign is best remembered for extraordinary achievements. She believed it was her divine mission to lead England, and under her direction, the country became strong and unified. Commerce and industry prospered. The queen herself was an expert musician and her court was the cultural center of its day. Some of the great writers in English literature—including William Shakespeare—appeared during her reign.

One current day op-ed columnist wrote this week of her experience at the Shakespeare Theater in Washington D.C. where she saw the magical play “Pericles.” In ancient Greece, the prince of Tyre tires of all the yes men around him. He chooses to trust the one courtier who intrepidly tells him: “They do abuse the king that flatter him...whereas reproof, obedient and in order, fits kings, as they are men, for they may err.”

Not flatter the king? Listen to dissenting viewpoints? Rulers who admit they've erred? “Now” wrote the columnist, “in the 21st century reign of King George II, flattery is mandatory, dissent is forbidden, and erring without admitting error is the best way to get ahead.”

On this holy day in the Christian liturgical calendar also denoted as “The Reign of Christ” or “Christ the King,” I've pondered deeply as to what characterizes a good life, or in the words of Queen Elizabeth what it means, “though God hath raised me high, to count the glory of a crown as to reign with your loves.”

The post-election furor has left me bewildered, and many of us (though I do not dare to presume all) scratching our collective heads. Whatever happened to humility? What IS a good life? And how is it that the subjects of one's four year reign (though not a substantial majority) decide that reigning with your loves comes down to upholding moral values? (And albeit filtered moral values) What's a moral value anyway? And who gets to decide?

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I'm left to wonder, and I suspect some of you are too, whether the emphasis on moral values has anything to do with loving our neighbor, turning the other cheek, good will toward all people, blessed be the peacemakers, and judge not lest ye be judged. These are all clearly articulated values in the Christian gospels. And, I learned this week that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke one out every nine verses concerns poverty. That's a staggering statistic in my mind. Further, Jesus never mentioned homosexuality so it does make me wonder all the more how he would define moral values. Nevertheless, religious voices during this election defined same-sex marriage as a non-negotiable issue.

I realize that this is not necessarily new information to many of you. But it does illuminate the fact there is a perilous danger in that it appears there is one, true religious voice on moral values. However, I am a deeply devoted Christian – I have been all my life – and I voted my values too. And as a person of faith and conscience, I come to some different conclusions about moral values.

Needless to say, driving our different moral value language stakes into the ground is not going to help us to a larger conversation. It will only further divide and polarize us. It will only subject all of us, regardless of our views and our values, into further demonization and mean-spiritedness that characterized the election in the first place.

One of my favorite writers put it this way: "Our founders had good reasons for keeping state and church separated. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, equality and justice for all are, as the writer Sue Halpern has said, "agnostic values." While many of the values... liberals share come to us from Judeo-Christian tradition, they are present in all religions, and they have been refined and enriched by persons who held no religious faith or for whom belief was private and sacred.

"I fear that all of this talk will simply turn into pandering to the Christian right, or wrapping up faith in a new package in order to win elections. George Bush and Karl Rove have made a Faustian bargain with the religious right, I think, and they may have a dragon by the tail. More so, I fear the dilution of what is mysterious, potent and finally unknowable into a collection of campaign slogans and sentimental sound bites.

"So certainly my hope is that... religious liberals will feel free to speak openly of our hopes and our doubts not as a cudgel to hammer everyone into line with us, but to describe what gives us meaning and what inspires us to act on behalf of others. The desire of our founders was that everyone would feel free to speak openly about anything. But more than that, I hope we will come to terms with

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how zealotry lies in all religions. Recall the horror of the wars fought and the blood shed, whenever religion is tied to domination.”

With that said, I return to two earlier questions. What characterizes a good life? And whatever happened to humility?

In our reading this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically the prophet Micah, we heard: *“God has shown you...what is good.”*

Let’s consider where we are at the moment. In a beautiful, sacred edifice called Memorial Church on the campus of Stanford University, considered a world-renowned research university. Like many modern universities, we aspire to essential values like excellence and fairness. Though a secular institution, our founders, Jane and Leland Stanford were keen on insisting that this vivid, spectacular and powerful symbol be raised precisely on this spot – the center of campus – to remind the University of a higher dimension and another direction. It is a symbol of the unity of mind and spirit and an assertion from perhaps our own tradition and from that of many other religious traditions importantly represented on this campus – that as a symbol it does remind us of a dimension beyond our own self-interest and self-perception. (Though this dimension today some would argue deserves its rightful critique) The purpose of an education is to combine academic study and personal formation with public virtue, public service. Though some may see this grand religious monument as something that does not belong in a modern university, whose purpose is seen rather to exist as a “think tank” of neutral international excellence and fairness, this symbol as a sacred building still makes us stand out from the crowd and presumably makes us hold the crowd to account.

While you might think this all well and good, as symbols point to something – what can we find at the end of this direction? How to give content to it? Especially now in this post election juncture, where moral values, and specifically the timeless message of the Christian gospels is subordinated to the self-interest of Americans and their nation, an ironic development for a country whose governmental structure was designed to prevent the government from establishing any religion.

Consequently, my deep concern about the religious rhetoric and more specifically moral values attributed to the results of this election have shown us perhaps that those who identify as Christian believers in this country filter their faith and belief through allegiance to the state. Wrote Joseph Wakelee Lynch, editor of The Witness Magazine, an independent publishing corporation for global justice: “Forgiveness is dosed with retribution; mercy with recrimination; hospitality with vilification of immigrants; hope with political prudence; stewardship with

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domination; the dignity of the individual with commodification of human life; justice with privatization; non-violence with patriotism; and the reign of God with international economic hegemony."

How do the rest of us preaching and worshipping here and clothed in various religious symbols of our own, respond to that? What can we find at the end of this direction? What characterizes a good life? Whatever happened to humility?

There is no hidden wisdom in the readings we heard this morning. The prophet Micah, called a "minor" prophet because this thin book looks like an abstract or a review compared to the big tomes of Jeremiah and Isaiah – couldn't have said it any clearer about what is good. In this minor prophecy there is a huge package. It packs quite a punch. God has made no secret of what it is. It is not special knowledge available only to the elite intellectual or to theologians and philosophers. It has broken all boundaries, religious included.

And what does God expect?

1. Do justice 2. Love kindness 3. Walk humbly with your God.

These are verbs, action words. Do justice, not simply take it. Love kindness, not simply love the idea of being kind. Walk humbly with God, not speculate on the nature of humility.

The people to whom Micah wrote these words were quite good at talking and speculating and gesturing and making symbolic actions. They could and did put on a good show; but amid all of it they acted as if they really had no clue what it was that God simply and clearly asked of them. This perhaps is why Micah virtually shouts: "Don't give me your rituals and rationalizations, for you know what God wants and expects of you: mercy, kindness and humility."

While I for one am not interested in pandering to the Christian right or wrapping up faith and religious belief in a new package to win elections, I do believe that what some have called the "Americanization of Jesus' message" does have to be countered and engaged by people of faith and intellect and quite frankly all religious traditions. And those of us particularly within progressive Christianity, myself included, must challenge how exactly the definition of morality and moral issues becomes so narrow and exclusive.

The questions - what is a good life? and whatever happened to humility? is not about avoiding the elementary obvious. They too are about moral values. I am convinced that a list of the values I hold dear, and as a Christian I might add, because I need to learn not to be chagrined by that identity, those these days I

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often am – would not differ from that of many politically conservative Christians. Faithfulness, repentance, forgiveness, mercy, love, hope, hospitality, charity, belief in the dignity of each person, respect for life and all of God's creation – all of these can unite me with those whose political decisions are drastically different than mine. Like others, it would also include non-violence, which may not be considered a value to some but is inseparable for me from the Christian Gospel's message. Unavoidably in Luke's passage today, Jesus chose to forgive those who most grievously put him to death. He did not choose retribution or recrimination. Such a painfully humble response he chose instead. *"Forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Nevertheless, how we live our values and assimilate our virtues often makes up the gulf between us. What is deeply disturbing to me is that in this country, many of its Christian citizens have melded their faith in Jesus Christ with a faith in the righteousness of the nation in which they live, to quote the words of Joseph Wakelee-Lynch. On these shores, a long-standing belief in America's exceptionalism endures; it has been our national hubris. And I am of the opinion that it leaves us floating aimlessly alone, far from the shores of humility.

Located here and now in this great university, called to do the work of both priest and prophet within this glorious religious symbol called Memorial Church, I am keenly aware about how some might conclude that religious values compromise the educational mission of the modern university. We are in the knowledge business not the virtue business. Knowledge unites, virtue divides. It has been said that smart people are not necessarily good people, for knowledge may be power but it is not virtue, and smart people often do wicked things. And I would dare say to students here this morning that if there is no connection between being smart and being good, you might as well save some money or ask for a refund.

Perhaps your biggest challenge is to consider how you might use that knowledge most effectively in discovering the truth about what is good and what is not good. Or what is a moral value and what is not a moral value. Or how and why and to what extent religion has a place in the public square.

However, what I finally want to say - because some of you might be wondering if I'm ever going to finish – what I want to say as priest and prophet among you is that the very foundation of this great institution is not only knowledge but virtue as well. With a prophetic passion I do say now more than ever that the cry that says mercy, kindness, and humility, the essence of justice and virtue must not fall to the side of our educational mission or be set aside in the name of modernity. We must speak with both informed faith and knowledge. We must speak with those who vehemently disagree with us, as difficult as that is.

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We must seek to understand and question what has drawn so many to the religious rhetoric of the right. We have this glorious place in which to make a proclamation, and all the more so my colleagues Rabbi Karlin-Neumann, Dean McLennan and I are deeply committed to advocating and educating for the virtues of religious pluralism and understanding. We have a free pulpit – a contrarian gospel to proclaim from it as well as the prophetic voices of the Torah and the wisdom of the Talmud. And we have a classroom too to enable us to teach that the moral dimension of greatness is goodness.

Let us carry on then, each of us, in this ever-important struggle of religion, of moral value, of virtue in all its nuances in the public square of our time and nation, for it places a burden on many of us who embrace both knowledge and virtue to strive for clarity, for truth, boldness and humility even in the highest places of this land. My fellow sojourners and citizens, there is so much work to be done.

God has shown you O woman, O man, O undergraduate, O graduate, O professor, O Reverend, O Rabbi, has shown us all what is good and what is required – but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

With acknowledgment:

Maureen Dowd
Nora Gallagher
Peter Gomes
Gene Nelson
Joseph Wakelee-Lynch