

October 16, 2016
Matthew 11:28-30; 18:1-5
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

Walking Humbly

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This fall we are doing a series on our new church covenant based on the prophetic words of Micah, *Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly with God.*

Today we focus on Walking Humbly. I've chosen two brief readings from the gospel of Matthew. The first speaks of Jesus being humble in heart and the second calls us to be humble like a child.

SERMON

Thank you for your civility. Thank you for your concern for our community, our state and our nation. Thank you for your best attempts to be clear about your own concerns and then to listen carefully to other peoples' concerns. Our work to be just and kind in our relationships with one another is a living out of our covenant and it matters in the world.

The current political landscape in our state and in our nation is traumatizing on so many levels. As I talk with people it is clear that many of us are exhausted by what is happening. The fissures in the fabric of our common life are painfully clear and deep.

The language fostering hatred, fear and violence is not only distasteful, it is dangerous. It is tempting to return vitriol for vitriol but our calling is to become more

and more grounded in justice, kindness and humility.

The word humble comes from the Latin root, humus, from which we get the word ground. In talking with our church school children a few weeks ago about our church covenant we discussed what it means to be humble. They get that it means not to be stuck on yourself, not to look down on other people.

Then I said something about being grounded in the ways of God. When I noticed some eyes getting big, I realized that for them "grounded" was not necessarily a positive word. For some of them being grounded was an experience of punishment not a spiritual discipline as I was suggesting. I briefly acknowledged that difference with them and moved on. However, I have been giving it considerable thought since then and have come to see some connections.

The ground is something we take for granted yet it is the very earth from whence we come and to which we will return. In this fall season the ground is preparing for winter. The leaves are changing color, the plants are dying back, many animals are storing food. Most of us have lived through enough years to know that in spring the process will reverse.

My mom tells a story about when I was little before I had the rhythms of the seasons figured out. There was a lot of snow that winter and all we had seen for weeks was white. I was used to it snowing. Then as the warmth of spring came the snow was melting. One day I got up in the morning and once again could see patches of the brown of the earth. In great excitement I exclaimed, "It's grounding out."

Maybe it's that sense of mystery that still draws me to find the image of grounding compelling. There are times for flying high in life but there are also times for being deeply rooted, deeply grounded.

In today's reading Jesus invites those who are weary to come to him - in fact to be yoked to him as oxen are yoked together as they work the earth. The promise is counter intuitive; but indeed it is when we accept the burden of the spiritual yoke that the burdens of our lives become lighter. Being yoked with Christ puts our hearts in direct connection with the humble heart of Jesus. And there is much to be learned in that proximity.

This is not a gentle, pastoral invitation. We didn't read the sections earlier in this chapter but Jesus had some harsh words for unrepentant cities where the misuse of power was rampant. His words about weariness are about the weariness of living in broken ways. The invitation is to change our ways from power mongering to humble groundedness.

This brings us back to the young people's understanding of grounded as punishment for doing something wrong. To them being grounded means you have to stay home

and your freedoms are restricted. You have to wear the "yoke of home." Ron and I never told our children they were grounded, but we did make them stay home when their choices were badly broken.

As parents I think we would be wise to focus less on being grounded as a punishment and more as an opportunity to practice the spiritual discipline of being grounded in the ways of God. When we focus on it as punishment we are centered in power dynamics, whereas when we focus on the need to be grounded in justice and kindness, we come from a position of humility. Being humble in heart as a parent is a life-long practice that invites us and our children into deeper spiritual maturity.

Walking humbly calls us to respect one another's person, one another's heart and one another's body. In recent days in the public arena, we have heard a great deal about predatory sexual behavior. Parents have had to talk with their children about matters for which they have felt unprepared. One TV commentator last week said she was not willing to let her 4th grader watch the presidential debate because of this topic.

Predatory sexual behavior whether perpetrated by men or women against either women or men is wrong and devastating to individuals and to the fabric of our common life. Clearly, it is unjust, it is unkind and it exhibits no humility. It is power mongering behavior, for which Jesus has very harsh words. We are a culture that has much work to do to address our weary brokenness in this and many areas.

After church today in our monthly Spirit Matters series we will be discussing Addictions and the Opioid Crisis. As you may know in the first half of this year in Maine there was a 50% increase in overdose deaths from last year.

Addictions have many masks and touch all our lives in one way or another. There are biochemical factors to addictions. There are emotional and economic components. There are also spiritual longings. In one way or another though addictions have a component of a longing - a longing for "home." One woman in writing about her alcohol addictions says, "As far back into my childhood as I can remember, was searching for something I could not name. Whatever I was looking for would help me to feel all right, at home, as though I belonged."
(Christina Grof, *Thirst*, by James Nelson, pg. 169)

I would say she longed for a grounded heart that was at home in the Spirit.

The words of the Christ echo to us through the ages,
Come to me all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens I will give you rest.