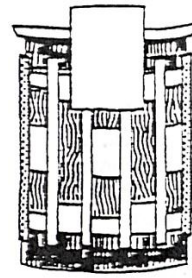


“Come By Here”
Rev. Dr. David E. Gray
Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church
June 10, 2012
Micah 6: 1-8; Matthew 25: 31-45



from the
BRADLEY
HILLS
PULPIT

Kumbaya my Lord, Kumbaya. Kumbaya my
Lord, Kumbaya. Kumbaya my Lord Kumbaya. O Lord. Kumbaya.

There has been some criticism of the U.S. national political candidates this past year for a lack of attention to issues of poverty. I expressed my concern in our March newsletter. As Presidential candidates tend to do, both party nominees have reiterated a focus on the middle class, for that's where the votes are.

Political agreement has become rare enough in Washington these days that when both sides agree the media often labels those situations “kumbaya moments,” as when the Senate quickly passed legislation on a drug shortage bill in May. At a White House dinner meeting for outgoing United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2006 the U.S. Ambassador joked about the lack of agreement by saying that “nobody sang Kumbaya” there.

The song Kumbaya has taken on cultural meaning. The song was big in the 1960s and 70's when groups like Peter Paul and Mary, the Weavers and Joan Baez recorded it. Many of us grew up singing it. As a boy, I can remember sitting around camp fires at Cub Scout weekends or at camp in Michigan kicking back and singing kumbaya with good friends. The idea of “sitting around singing kumbaya” has become a metaphor for agreement and idyllic conditions.

And yet, in reality, these “kumbaya” moments are the opposite of what the song really meant. The history of the song is that “Kumbaya” mispronounces an African America spiritual lyric. The words as they were originally written were, “come by here.” Far from looking to idyllic conditions, Kumbaya was written as a call on those who were

ignoring injustice in the world, specifically in the rural south, to “come by here” and see the needs of the people. It was written to encourage people from the north to come and see the challenges of people’s lives in Georgia and North Carolina in the 1920’s. Or to come by here and experience the racial division and poverty in the Mississippi Delta during the Great Depression of the 1930’s and then to do something about it. Kumbaya, as it was originally written and sung, was serious and powerful. Not intended to create a sense of passive acquiescence or complacency, but to engage people in the reality of the lives of the poor.

It is out of that same tradition that the anthem we heard this morning expresses the longing of God’s people to cross over into the freedom of the campground.

I had a “come by here” moment at a different kind of campground three weeks ago. On a very rainy night on May 23, I joined caseworkers from Bethesda Cares in going to several homeless camps in northern Montgomery County to interview residents there.

We focused on two camps located behind White Flint Mall, really walking distance from the Presbytery offices. One in the woods behind a dental office and the other in the woods behind a railroad track and old car lot. We walked down mud down paths to the tents and benches where residents congregated. I saw the clothes hanging from trees to dry, but becoming more wet from the rain. There in the woods, we slipped as we walked.

I went to help Bethesda Cares caseworkers interview residents for their Vulnerability Index – a survey intended to determine which members of the community are most vulnerable to medical issues and, in the winter, environmental challenges like hypothermia. We sat on benches or in the tents, lit by flashlights, and asked questions about medical history, employment, life and ways of living. The residents know the people from Bethesda Cares and were happy to see us as we brought clean socks and some more lights. We asked them questions about how they

got to be homeless. How long they had been living there. Some had been living in the same camp more than five years.

It was a different perspective from my previous experiences with the homeless in New Haven soup kitchens. Or in Boston. In those cities, like in Bethesda, most of the homeless live alone, like those in our community at the bus station or metro. There, mental illness and schizophrenia are major issues. It's amazing to talk with Sue Kirk, the head of Bethesda Cares, about the homeless in Bethesda. Sue knows the population well and thanks to her I have come to know some. The man outside the parking lot on Bethesda Avenue, or the brilliant, bi-polar fellow who sleeps on the park bench on Wisconsin Ave.

Things have gotten better in Bethesda; there has been a 50% reduction in homelessness in last 2 years in Bethesda in part because of Bethesda Cares. Which this church has supported since its beginning. At the North Montgomery County camps, where too many people remain, there is less mental illness but criminal records are more common and there is more substance abuse.

I was deeply moved by the conversations. One man was born in south of Dayton Ohio as I was. Yet different circumstances led us to different places and we connected at the camp. Another man drinks a pint of hard alcohol a day. He had just finished when I talked with him. He seemed unaffected. One man, once a larger man, who was down to fewer than 80 pounds and was wasting away in his tent from liver disease. It was hard to intervene but we needed to connect him with medical care.

A girl who we interviewed was born in 1992. Had three kids. When we asked where they were she said with great sadness, "with my mother." Sadness that her addiction left her unable to care for her young children.

I had one man tell me that as a boy he wanted to be a preacher. At least his mother wanted him to be a preacher. He went to college for three years, now worked at a gas station and every other Saturday night he

used the paycheck to buy a bag of powder cocaine. He lived in the camp as a result.

Most of the residents lacked insurance and their medical care came from emergency rooms. One man we interviewed had visited the ER seven times in the past month.

The sound of the train, so near, loud and powerful it rattled the ground, raced by every 30 minutes. It makes it hard to talk let alone sleep.

Some people said they don't want help or to get out, but most did. Part of our response is to figure out who is the leader in the camps. If we can get the leader of the group to buy into the programs, the others will follow.

Much of the key is affordable housing. If people can get out of the tents and into housing, then they have incentive to find treatment, stay clean and perhaps find a job, because they don't want to lose the housing. But housing is expensive.

Jennifer Haddox of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary writes, "Mission is not what we do for God, but what God is doing through us in the world." In many ways, the song Kumbaya is ultimately about the people asking God to come by here and help.

As the Bible omits much of Jesus' childhood, scholars debate whether Jesus' family was in the middle class in his day or poorer. We know his parents weren't rich, that Jesus was uninterested in achieving economic status and that Jesus called disciples largely from common trades. There is no doubt that Jesus was very concerned about the poor. There was little safety net in his day, and Jesus called those who would be fishers of people to concern for those who needed a net. In Matthew 25, Jesus said that when the Son of Man comes in his glory he will divide people by on their response to the needy. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and

you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it . . .?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me.’”

At a time of slow economic growth and 8%+ unemployment nationally, the poor in our area and beyond feel acute pressure. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, America's poverty rate rose in 2010 (the latest data available), to the highest level in 17 years - 15.1%. More than 46 million Americans are considered poor. I attended the interfaith works caregivers conference run by Interfaith Works a few weeks ago. Our county has 60K neighbors living under the federal poverty level, a large waiting list of families waiting for housing assistance, 1/3 of them children.

Each month people come to our church asking for money or for help to pay rent or utilities. We want to help, but we have limited resources.

Economic pressure impacts many of us emotionally. If you or someone in your family is facing pressure and needs someone to talk to, come see me. If you have extra resources this time of year, join our church in supporting Bethesda Cares or one of the similar programs that can help.

Our second lesson this morning contains familiar language from the prophet Micah about what God requires of us. In the 8th century, Micah was also concerned about conditions for the poor and justice in Israel. He suggested that Israel was failing in its responsibilities to its covenant with God. So our lesson is really a trial. Israel and God are on opposite sides and the hills and mountains, which had been present since the early days of creation and thus able to judge fidelity to the covenant, were slated to act as jury.

In our lesson God seems to plead with his people, “What have I done to you? That you should act with such disobedience?”

For God's side, God lists some of the things God has done in helping Israel. And then Israel seems to ask what it can do for God to restore relationship? It asks if it should make great offerings of property and oil?

No, Micah concludes in his famous question about what God requires of us, but rather you should do justice, love kindness, or mercy as the King James Version puts it, and to walk humbly with our God. Nothing fancy. No attention grabbing sacrifice. No great self-loathing, but simple compassion, decency, humility, and justice. Obeying God and loving neighbor.

Both Matthew and Micah set up kinds of trials for God's people. Eventually each of us will measure our lives or find them measured.

Remembering Jesus' words that it is important how we treat the "least of these," and Micah's statement about God's requirements of justice, love and obedience we think less about the great one time gifts we give to God, than about our everyday walks with our creator and our attitudes towards each other.

It starts with our opportunities right here as a church. Next Sunday we'll commission 18 members of our community who will go into Washington D.C. for a week to make a difference for the homeless there. Our initiatives with Habitat for Humanity, our work with Bethesda Cares, Bethesda HELP, Interfaith Works, S.O.M.E and the other charities that are well equipped to provide the kind of support needed. As Susie noted, our local kitchen ministry is meeting this Monday at 7pm and Tuesday morning at 8am to put together food for some of the Homeless in our area. One of you suggested to me at the picnic last Sunday that we invite the Washington homeless choir to sing here and we'll consider that this summer as well as a potential food program from the Bethesda Farmer's Market. It can be through this community in a hands-on way that you do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God as you consider your covenant with the creator.

As Micah suggests, God expresses deep emotions towards us. When we leave our comfort zone and are willing to “come by” where the needs are, in whatever way we do, we invoke deep emotions inside ourselves.

A few weeks ago, a man, Charles, came to our 8:30 service. I know Charles. I know his background from Bethesda Cares experiences. I know why he was here. He came for money, and was happy to wait on the outside of the 8:30 prayer circle service until we were finished to ask for it. But on a Sunday morning that is no place to be. So we invited him to join the circle. Charles received no money that day but lifted up a praying in our circle. I asked him to come back during the week so we could talk. Frankly, usually when I suggest that people don't return. But Charles did. And we talked and cried and prayed together, and stayed in mutual relationship.

Bradley Hills should be a place where people come by here and find an ear that listens and find that they are welcome.

This should be a place where people come by here and see we are preparing food or preparing missionaries to go into the world.

This should be a place where visitors, new members and longtime members come by here and find ways to use their gifts to meet the needs of the world in fulfillment of God's covenant and in furthering their walk with God.

Because any church of Jesus Christ should be reminded that in Christ the divine came by here to see the needs of God's creation and through the Holy Spirit decided to stay and help.

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