A.M.D.G. Sunday, January 18th, 2015 Texts: Micah 6:8

Luke 6: 27-38

2 Cor. 5: 17-20a

**Micah 6: 8** God has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to

do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

**Luke 6: 27-38**  ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you…. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;  give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

**2 Corinthians 5: 17-20** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

**Je Suis Charlie**

You know what they say – life is what happens when you make other plans. Well – preachers have a similar saying: ***God*** is what happens when you make other plans! By Wednesday of this week, I was congratulating myself on being a bit ahead of the game in getting ready for today’s service. But as I lay in bed Wednesday night before I went to sleep – I found myself thinking of the past 10 days or so – particularly the Paris’ shootings and the subsequent world response. Weighty thoughts before sleeping! And I realized that it was important for us, as a Christian community, to talk about this and other tragedies that have happened of late – and to explore together how our faith connects and interacts with what is going on around us. Now – let me be clear – I do not presume to have all the answers. I am struggling every bit as much as you and everyone else in trying to grasp the magnitude and implications of these and other terrorist attacks that seem to be plaguing our world so much of late. So what I humbly offer this morning is my own inner questions and fears and prayers – and invite you to join me in the conversation. What should be our response as Christians in the face of such senseless tragedy unfolding in our world?

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I think our first response to the horrible and frightening violence of the past 10 days is to begin where we are – where our hearts are – in grief and lament. Let us mourn first the fact that we live in a world in which such violence is becoming more and more common and banal. News broke on Thursday of this week of the villages in Northern Nigeria that were attacked and destroyed by the terrorist group Boko Haram. It happened on the same day as the Paris massacres. Amnesty International estimates 3700 homes were demolished and as many as 2000 may have died. And to add to the horror – there is some evidence to suggest that some of the 300 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram last year – may have been used as human bombs. And also on Thursday of this week, the report on the missing Aboriginal women was released to the public. When people who are made in God’s image engage in such ghastly acts against others – it should break our hearts, as surely as it does God’s. As Nick so poignantly sang for us earlier: *“God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused, at children’s innocence abused. And till we change the way we love, God weeps. God bleeds at anger’s fist, at trust betrayed, at women battered and afraid. And till we change the way we win, God bleeds.”* (*More Voices # 78)* To lament is to stand in a time-honoured tradition seen in the Bible and with people of faith through the centuries – to name for ourselves and others what is unacceptable in our lives and in God’s world. It is to stand alongside in solidarity with the victims and the suffering. We cannot take away the pain – but we can support – and we can bear witness to their story (as we did with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). And we can work together to bring about change and reconciliation – the peace, justice and wholeness that is God’s vision for creation.

Much of the dialogue this past week following the shootings in Paris has focussed on freedom of speech – particularly in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Satire at its best, can be a tool used to expose the powerful and reveal society’s hypocritical and often humourous imperfections. The biblical prophets used both satire and humour to challenge existing political and religious structures. And even Jesus often acted and spoke in similar ways to undermine religious hypocrisy and political oppression. A well known example would be his comment: *“Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.”* *(Matt.7:1-5)*

A key issue for faith communities is how they respond to those who offend them. Jesus tells us to bless those who persecute us, to return love for hate and good for evil – and even to love our enemies. Loving your enemies certainly includes supporting the foundational commitment to free speech – but are there limits? In order to honour freedom of speech – do we not also have to honour the dignity of human beings? No one can be allowed to curb free speech with the veto of violence – and that’s what many around the world – both non-religious and religious – are now standing up for. Even Pope Francis jumped into the debate this week. Speaking to journalists flying with him to the Philippines, he said last week’s attacks were an ‘aberration’ – and such horrific violence in God’s name could not be justified. He staunchly defended freedom of expression – but then he said there were limits – especially when people mocked religion. *“You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others. There is a limit.”*

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I’m not so sure that religion should be exempt from criticism or satire. Being able to laugh at ourselves is important. Seeing how we look through someone else’s eyes can be very enlightening. But my struggle comes with that razor sharp line between satire and cruelty or satire and a total disrespect for the dignity of another. Then it just becomes bullying or demeaning – and is that acceptable? How do we uphold freedom of expression while at the same time denouncing viciousness and malice and harmful intent? Douglas Todd suggested in an article in yesterday’s Sun newspaper that religious people need to grow thicker skins. That’s probably true. And he ends his articles with some good questions for further thought: *“I personally,” he said, “have no need to publically mock someone’s religious (or atheistic) beliefs. But that doesn’t mean I won’t be accused of it. Some people are extremely easy to offend. So (he asks) – do we walk on eggshells around such people, religious and otherwise, who believe they have a kind of sacred right to be hyper-sensitive? Or do we engage in honest exchange to defend the values of a democratic society? Even though I dislike some of the cruder forms of satire, I dearly hope the genre has a robust future.”* *(Vancouver Sun Jan. 17, 2015)*

Another aspect of the terrible tragedy surrounding the Paris’ massacres that has given me pause to think is how quickly we rush to stereotype in our world. Some of the news coverage has been referring to the shooters as *‘Islamists’*. I think it is very important to remember that all religions have a fundamentalist and extremist element associated with them. And Christianity is certainly no exception. Many acts of violence, hatred, prejudice and censorship have been perpetrated by Christians through the centuries – to our shame! For a recent example, we need look no further than the whole residential school program in Canada that sought to ‘*take the Indian out of the child’* – all in the name of Christianity. And that’s within most of our lifetimes!

With these most recent events in Paris – many were drawn to the Muslim police officer, Ahmed Marabet, who was killed trying to defend the staff at Charlie Hebdo. And that reminds me that millions of those claiming Islam as their faith would be proud of that Muslim police officer’s behaviour – and deeply grieved and angered about the totally false and completely distorted representations of their faith that were claimed by the terrorists in Paris. We cannot afford to stereotype one people, one culture, one religion on the basis of those who often distort and disrespect the core values of the whole. I think its especially important at this time – when those who follow Islam ***are*** being stereotyped as dangerous terrorists – to stand together in solidarity as people of all faiths who seek justice, compassion, and peace – rather than hatred and violence. Our Moderator, the Rt.Rev. Gary Paterson, expresses that well in an open letter he sent this week on behalf of the United Church to the Canadian Council of Imams, which you can find on our church website.

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So – I’ll end where I started – with the question “*What should be our response as Christians in the face of events such as we have witnessed in the recent past?”*  Forgiveness is key, I think. Although I know some Muslims around the world were upset with the picture of the prophet Mohammed weeping, holding the sign “Je suis Charlie” – I found it very poignant – and much truer a statement about Islamic belief than the murder of innocent people. Especially with the caption at the top, which reads “Tout est pardonne” – “all is forgiven”. Not that we should forget, condone, or trivialize what has happened. But, as Jesus reminds us today in scripture – forgiveness is key. Anger only begets more anger. And we will not defeat frightening and growing terrorist violence with more wars, more soldiers, more drones, more deaths. “*Love your enemies,”* Jesus tells us in our scripture today, “*do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”* I was so inspired and humbled by a recent example of this in the situation in Edmonton, where 9 people were killed. At the local Buddhist temple, the community prayed not only for the victims – but also for the man who had murdered them. Forgiveness is what we have to do if we are to heal, the community leader said. So – what can we do? *We can forgive*.

*And we can pray* …. pray for those killed at Charlie Hebdo’s headquarters in Paris; pray for those killed at the Jewish kosher supermarket nearby; pray for those murdered by Boko Haram in Nigeria; and pray for the missing Aboriginal women in our own country.

And – as our Buddhist friends in Edmonton remind us – pray also for the perpetrators of violence. And then leave it in God’s hands.

So we can forgive and we can pray. *And we can act* … We cannot allow fear and helplessness to paralyze us. Never has the need for God’s love to be demonstrated more urgent. Our Christian faith calls us to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation in our own lives, in our communities, and in our world. St. Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth tells us that “*God is make His appeal through us,”* and urges us to be ‘*ambassadors for Christ’* – in our words and actions letting the love of Christ shine through us – bit by bit – gesture by gesture – situation by situation.

May we all have the courage to live out our faith in real and concrete ways in these challenging times! Amen – may it be so!