

Sermon: Micah 6.8

Grace and peace to you from the creator, redeemer and sustainer of life.

Let us pray, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each heart be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our strength and redeemer.

Before getting in to the sermon I'm going to show you a Mission Service you-tube video that gives a nice overview of the work of the ministry.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AB5nrWvhGsE>

You probably didn't recognize that guy in the video who had long hair. Well that was me. It wasn't that I was a leftover hippy, actually I was too young for that era, but when I first came to Toronto I was working with the battered women's movement and I grew my hair long as a symbol of standing in solidarity with abused women. For years my wife and several of my colleagues were pestering me to get my haircut. I can't help it that I had a mullet before they were in style and even had a mullet when they weren't in style. Well eventually I succumbed to the haircut pressure but said it was not going to be cheap and agreed to cut my hair for a cause. So a few years ago I got my haircut and raised \$4,000 worth of pledges in which half went to the Jane Finch Community Ministry and half went to, another United Church Community Ministry, North End Stella in Winnipeg, which works with the aboriginal community. Originally I was going to grow my hair long again but my wife said, "Are you crazy, people paid good money to get your haircut... especially your Mother."

In agreeing to come speak today I was excited when I found out that the lectionary texts were the beatitudes and the text from Micah. I really like preaching from the lectionary texts when I speak about the community ministry. Sometimes these ministries are seen as glorified social work positions. Although they may have some commonalities it is really because of the heart of the gospel that we as the church are called to this work.

The beatitudes are a wonderful set of propositions that turn the standards of this world upside down and reveal to us the realm of God in a completely different way. Might is not right. Those that do not have in this world are blessed by God and are promised that as the realm of God is issued in that they will have what is rightfully theirs. Justice to those that are denied justice will be granted. The gospel text is further reinforced by the Micah text.

In Micah 6:8, in a simple way, it is revealed to us how we should live out our lives as followers of Jesus. “to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God” In some ways it seems so simple but yet it is hard to live out. In my undergraduate degree I once wrote a paper about acts of kindness. Did you know that if one day you did one act of kindness to two people and they in turn they did an act of kindness to two other people the next day. And then this continued that in less than one month all the people of the world would be affected. Amazing. Many times we think that the world is too large and how can we ever make a difference.

Much of the work of the community ministry is about seeking justice. Although we are involved in some charitable acts we recognize it is systems of oppression that keep people oppressed. This needs to be challenged and justice needs to be sought. It’s that turning of the world upside down which we hear about in the beatitudes.

Just so that you don’t think that I’m a raving lunatic when I talk about systemic change I would like to share with you a couple stories about economic justice and some of the systemic change that I have been involved in.

When I first started working in the Jane and Finch Community there was this problem that many people in the community were being denied the opportunity to open up bank accounts just because they had limited income and were seen as being “too much of a risk” This meant that

people on social assistance, with a regular check coming in from the government were having to go to money marts in order for them to cash their check. So with the meager assistance they were getting, the money marts were getting a huge cut. So a community activist by the name of Ruth Morris organized this coalition of some community workers, the Mennonite Central committee and six bank managers. They realized that this was not right and through their lobbying the national banking regulations were changed so that it is now illegal to refuse someone a bank account just because they have limited income or are on social assistance.

In celebrating the success of this project at an Annual General Meeting of one of the participating agencies, I had the fortunate opportunity of eating a meal with one of the VP's the Royal Bank. I spoke of the many exciting projects that I was involved in and my role as being a resource to the community. One of the questions that he asked me is how is your position funded. I explained that in our presbytery when some of the churches were sold some of the proceeds were set aside to support community-based ministry. It was really about converting capital resources into human resources. I never realized what kind of impact that I made on this person. He went away from that meeting and amidst his banking circles he started saying, "I met this Minister without portfolio and if the Church can dedicate a Minister to work with the community without a congregation, maybe the Bank should think about providing a bank manager to work with the community without a bank." And thus the Community Banker Project became born. How they funded the program was to take the proceeds of one of the bank buildings they sold as part of their downsizing.

A bank manager was seconded, for two years, to work with the community as a resource in helping to develop local community economic initiatives. In addition to this the bank funded a community banker apprentice position to work on the project for a total of four years. Not only did they do this project in Jane Finch but they supported four

other similar projects in low income communities in Toronto, Montreal and Regina.

Now let me step forward to 2007. I was the chair of the economic working group with the Black Creek Community Capacity project. This project was developed in response to the shooting death in 1999 of Breanna Davy, a three year old who was killed by gun cross fire.

As a Community Minister it was my first memorial that I conducted in the community and I was stricken with grief. Marie Augimeri, one of the city councilors, was also deeply moved by the situation. Later that summer she brought many city commissioners and officials to meet with leaders in the community to begin a planning process to determine what kind of changes could be done to make the Jane Finch community a safer place to live and that Breanna's death would not be in vain.

Three things emerged from that meeting. The first was the development of a memorial for Breanna, which took the form of a public art display, celebrating community, at the Driftwood Community center. The second development was the commitment from the City and Public housing to look at the infrastructure re-design of the Yorkwoods community to make it safer and integrate it with the surrounding neighbourhood. This plan is currently on hold waiting to learn from the pilot project of the redevelopment of Regent Park. The third development was initiating a needs assessment. Instead of doing a needs assessment (which looks at the glass being half empty) in 2001 it was decided to look at doing a community capacity research project. This process has been to look at the strengths, skills and capacity of the community and how we can build on these assets in order to meet the specific challenges that the community faces.

A working group for the Black Creek West Community Capacity project was established and made up of six different city departments, three reps from the Network of Community Based Organizations (me being one of them) and York University. In 2002, phase 1 of the project took place developing a snapshot of the community which included determining who

lives in the community and what type of community based services exist. In May of 2003 the phase 1 report was approved by city council and it was agreed to establish a broad base reference group and develop a process of conducting community consultations. In 2004 thirteen focus groups were conducted with various sectors of the community (parents, children, faith leaders, youth, community service providers, seniors, business reps, ethno-cultural groups, geographic communities, and institutional reps.). Joyette Consulting Services were hired through funds from the Toronto Dominion Bank to conduct the focus groups and develop a report with priority actions. These priority actions were further refined at a community forum which took place in the winter of 2005. And eventually an action plan was approved by the city's policy a finance committee. One of the four working groups, which I found myself chairing, was Improving the Economic Independence and Stability of the community. For the first couple of years we looked at how we could increase youth employment opportunities by 50% and how could we leverage the city as an asset in hiring more people from Jane and Finch. Again the focus of this project was looking at how we build on the strengths, skills and assets of the community.

In 2007 Murray McAdam who was the Jane Finch community banker apprentice, now had the social justice portfolio with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto approached us and said that the Diocese had \$40,000 in a micro credit program to support small business development but they were looking at closing it up and would we be interested in taking it over as a Jane Finch project. Of course we said yes but the Anglican bishops decided that they could use the 40,000 in a different way. Sunder Singh who is the Executive Director of the Elspeth Heyworth Centre, a program for South Asian women, and who was part of the economic working group, said no problem. If you have \$100 and some one else has \$200 and some else has \$1,000 we can build our own community loan fund. And thus the Black creek micro credit program became born.

I have to admit that the Jane and Finch Community Ministry has been one of the major driving force in the development of a micro credit program in the Jane Finch community. After three years of development from several organizations and a professor at York University, the Black Creek Micro-credit program was successfully launched last winter. Micro-credit programs provide loans to people who have good business ideas but cannot access credit from mainstream banks. In many ways the program was adopted from the micro-lending program that Muhammad Yunus developed in Bangladesh. He actually received a Noble peace prize for his work. Muhammad Yunus believes everyone should have a right to credit.

The loans of up to \$5,000 are guaranteed by a pot of funds raised by the community in the form of investments. Alterna administrates the actual loans, and there is a 5% administration fee on each of the loans that helps to cover any bad debits. Investments can be as little as \$250 and pay a return of 1%. Currently we have about \$50,000 in the investment pot but want to build the pot to \$200,000. Just recently a United Church Congregation agreed to invest \$10,000 from their trust funds.

Last year we had 5 applications. And the word of mouth is really starting to pick up. This month I think that I have been getting 5 calls per week in regards to people expressing some interest. Not every one who calls or for that matter applies gets a loan. We have small business drop-in to assist people and as well we refer to appropriate small business programs for training. Although these loans are based on character they still must prove to the loan review committee that they have a good business plan that will work. The program really is about being a "hand up" not a "hand out".

To find out more information about how you can invest or support this program as a volunteer mentor please visit our website at

www.blackcreekcapacity.ca/communityloanfund . If you are interested I have left some brochures at the back that describe the program in more detail

To find out more about the work of your Presbytery Community Ministries - Jane Finch and Davenport Perth look at www.twpcommunityministry.org "

Well I think I have been speaking enough but in closing I would just like to remind us of what the prophet Micah said to the people of his day and age as well as to us today “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” (RSV) Or as Gerald Vandezande states, in *Justice Not Just Us*: “Do justice, show mercy, practise faithfulness, and demonstrate love as you humbly walk with God in fellowship with your neighbours. These biblical basics mean that we are called to affirm human dignity, build community, advocate justice and equity, and practise compassion and solidarity.”¹

Amen.

Let us pray.

We thank-you for the gifts of communities, such as Jane and Finch. Help us to stand with them in their troubles and build upon their strengths and assets. As we continue to seek justice and do acts of kindness help us to humbly walk with you.

In Christ’s name amen.

Barry Rieder is originally from Calgary, Alberta but has lived in Toronto now for the last 25 years. He has a Social Work degree from the University of Calgary and a Master of Theological Studies from Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Although his formal training is in social work and theology, much of his learning and education has come from various communities and organizations that he has worked with over the years. He has been a children's counselor in the Battered Women's movement, a youth literacy worker with the Downtown Church Worker's Association, a community youth worker at Davenport Perth Community Health Centre, a

¹ Vandezande, *Justice Not Just Us*, 22.

community development worker for an inter-faith coalition in Lawrence Heights and a program consultant with the Addiction Research Foundation. For the last fifteen years he has been working for The United Church of Canada as a Community Minister in a culturally diverse, low-income community of Toronto called Jane and Finch. In Jane and Finch there is representation of over 100 ethno-cultural groups speaking 72 different languages and dialects. The Ministry office is situated in a small public housing community called Firgrove and Barry's role has been to provide community development support, pastoral care and advocacy through coalitions and networks. In 2006 Barry received an award for Outstanding Achievement in the Area of Social Justice. In Oct. 2009 he got an honorary Doctorate degree for his work in the community.