

We Have a Hammer

Texts:

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

A sermon preached by
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Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.” ⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, 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?

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



“Owimoweh”

Owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh,
Owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh,
Owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh,
Owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh, owimoweh.

In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight,
In the jungle, the quiet jungle, the lion sleeps tonight.

Wee-ee-ee-ee ... wee ooh wimoweh,

Wee-ee-ee-ee ... wee ooh wimoweh.

My friend David Tatgenhorst, pastor of St. Luke UMC in Bryn Mawr, met Pete Seeger a few times over the years. Earlier this week, the day Seeger died, David posted on Facebook a photo of his son Elijah who is now 18 years old, sitting next to Pete Seeger. The caption reads: “Elijah and Pete Seeger, back when Elijah was 8 or 9 and Pete was only 130 years old. Pete never slowed down. [My wife] and I saw him at the Two Row Wampum Festival in his [New England] hometown just this fall.”

I never knew Pete Seeger. Or at least I thought I didn’t.

Mrs. Cranmer taught third grade at Mary W. Devine Elementary School where I attended. She was probably 22 or 23 years old, she wore short, brightly colored dresses, and her blonde hair was up in a beehive. She had a toddler son named Jon-Jon – it was 1968 so that famous Kennedy name made perfect sense – 1968 – in April that year, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated – in June Robert Kennedy was assassinated – in September I turned 8 and

started 3rd grade. Mrs. Cranmer was the coolest teacher I had to that point in my long academic career and I had a bit of a crush on her.

In that turbulent year she taught us folk songs. “Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley,” “Michael Row the Boat Ashore,” “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” “500 Miles (Away from Home),” “This land is Your Land,” and of course, “If I Had a Hammer.”

Turns out I knew Pete Seeger. We all knew Pete Seeger. He is one of those voices of our lives that play in the background soundtrack over and over again. He wrote most of those songs Mrs. Cranmer taught us – or he adapted them – or he made them popular in the 1960s American folk music revival along with artists like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte and Odetta.

“Michael Row the Boat Ashore”

Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah.

Sister help to trim the sail, hallelujah
Sister help to trim the sail, hallelujah

Jordan's River is deep and wide, hallelujah.
Meet my mother on the other side, hallelujah.

Jordan's River is chilly and cold, hallelujah.
Chill's the body, but not the soul, hallelujah.

Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah

Pete Seeger’s heart and message was in a very theological place. He was mostly labeled a humanist and maybe he’d chuckle a bit if he knew some called him a theologian. But he knew and spoke often about the fact that we can’t row this boat that we call earth by ourselves. *“If it can’t be reduced, reused, repaired, rebuilt, refurbished, refinished, resold, recycled or composted, then it should be restricted, redesigned or removed from production.”* Participation is what will rescue us – participation in the seemingly minor things in this world.

“I’ve never sung anywhere without giving the people listening to me a chance to join in - as a kid, as a lefty, as a man touring the U.S.A. and the world, as an oldster. I guess it’s kind of a religion with me. Participation. That’s what’s going to save the human race.”

Participation seems like a little thing, but it’s the little things that make a difference.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

The little things. Like recognizing that God’s desire for us is that we live as if we love each other. The little things. Like living our lives acknowledging that those who the world pushes to the margins are actually the ones who Jesus knew as blessed. Little things. Like food and comfort for everyone, like the fact that meekness and mercy brings true power, like peace is the work of God’s children. The little things make a difference.

Susan Thistlethwaite, theologian and former president of Chicago Theological Seminary, took some heat this week from those who knew Seeger as an atheist or a humanist when she wrote about a Seeger theology for *Huffington Post*. She wrote that she knew he had a theology because his “music is a deeply spiritual influence in my life. ...One of the reasons I believe a better world is possible is because I can hear the voice of Pete Seeger in my head, singing *We Shall Overcome*. ‘We are not afraid,’ sang Seeger, and credited the young leaders of the Civil Rights movement for teaching that. ‘Perfect love casts out fear,’ scripture teaches (1 John 4:18).”

I suppose that’s what I’m realizing also. Songs like what I learned from Mrs. Cranmer in 3rd grade have had a tremendous impact on my world view and on my understanding of who God is in my life and how God wants me to live in this world.

“[I used to say] I was an atheist,” Pete Seeger said, “Now I say, it’s all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I’m not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I’m looking at God. Whenever I’m listening to something I’m listening to God.”

And when he listened to God he realized that it’s these little things that make a difference. Four years ago at the big party celebrating his 90th birthday Seeger said: “*Well, normally I’m against big things. I think the world is going to be saved by millions of small things. Too many things can go wrong when they get big.*”

"Turn! Turn! Turn!"

To everything - turn, turn, turn
There is a season - turn, turn, turn
And a time for every purpose under heaven

A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep

To everything - turn, turn, turn
There is a season - turn, turn, turn
And a time for every purpose under heaven

It’s the prophetic message of Micah which rings in my head when I sing songs like these. What does the Lord require of us – of me – but “to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God”? What does the Lord require of you? It’s the little things that really are no small thing.

J. Barrett Lee, Presbyterian pastor of North Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, wrote a letter to Pete Seeger after his death:

Thank you. Thank you for bringing light and joy into a world that often seems so dark and grim. Something about the way you put notes and words together has kept faith, hope, and love alive in us for over half a century. What’s more: you weren’t content to simply entertain us; you invited us to enter into the song ourselves. When we hear your songs, we hear them in our own voices. They have become ours because you gave them away. We will keep the faith by keeping the songs. We will teach them to our children. We will write our own. We will lift up our hearts and voices until the Beloved Community has become a reality on this earth. And in the end, when that day comes, you will be there and your voice will be heard in ours. So long, Pete. You leave us as you found us: singing, singing, singing...

“God’s Counting on You, God’s Counting on Me,” Seeger wrote later in his life. It’s a song reminding us again that we are one humanity, we have one planet, what we do affects eternity, and if we work together we can solve these problems.

*It's time to turn things around
Trickle up, not trickle down
God's counting on me
God's counting on you*

“Trickle down.” It’s what is broken about our economy but also about most everything else in the world. We are persuaded to believe that as long as things at the top are going well, everything at the bottom will benefit as well. But it’s not what empirical evidence shows so why do we believe it? It’s not God’s message through Micah. “Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.” If you do that, says trickle down theory, you end up on the bottom receiving the trickles rather than on top where the river flows mightily. You can’t be just and kind and humble and still expect to succeed in today’s world says trickle down.

And it’s clearly not the Jesus message. His message is that we must love each other because humanity is one. Love – and care for – the poor. Love – and feed – the hungry. Love – and visit – the prisoner. Love – and work for – peace. Love – and be merciful to those who need it. Love – and be persecuted for that love. “A good song reminds us what we're fighting for,” said Pete Seeger.

And, I would add, “love – and” is a song to sing all over this world.

If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)

If I had a hammer,
I'd hammer in the morning,
I'd hammer in the evening,
All over this land,

I'd hammer out danger,
I'd hammer out a warning,
I'd hammer out love between,
My brothers and my sisters,
All over this land.

If I had a bell,
I'd ring it in the morning,
I'd ring it in the evening,
All over this land,

I'd ring out danger,
I'd ring out a warning,
I'd ring out love between,
My brothers and my sisters,
All over this land.

If I had a song
I'd sing it in the morning
I'd sing it in the evening
all over this land

I'd sing out danger
I'd sing out warning
I'd sing out love between
my brothers and my sisters
all over this land

Well, I've got a hammer
and I've got a bell
and I've got a song to sing
all over this land

It's the hammer of justice
It's the bell of freedom
It's a song about love between my

brothers and my sisters
all over this land

It's the hammer of justice
It's the bell of freedom
It's a song about love between
my brothers and my sisters
All over this la-a-and

.....

We have a hammer. Justice, kindness, humility. It's a hammer that brings comfort for the least, a hammer of meekness and righteousness, of mercy and purity of heart. It is a hammer that demands of us respect and peace and love.

Amen.