

“It’s For Your Own Good” ~ January 30, 2011
Micah 6:1-8; I Cor. 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12; Psalm 15

The title for this sermon has been changed. It is now “It’s for Your Own Good.”

Very often when I am working through the lectionary and reading scriptures, I tackle them three months at a time. As I read, I select hymns for that time period trying to tie them into the theme for each particular Sunday and trying to give Vima at least a clue of what’s up. Sometimes, during this process, I choose a sermon title.” But, sermons often take on a life of their own when they are being written and titles chosen in advance and printed in the bulletin no longer fit as well as I would like. So, things change. There are no instructions regarding this, just a sense that things have gone in a different direction.

In life, on the other hand, we find instructions for just about everything. There is that familiar one on medicine bottles, or household cleaning products that says, “Hold down while turning until you hear a click.” Or, another says, “Cut along the dotted line.” And, yet another, “To open, turn to the right, to close, to the left.”

All these instructions, we are told are “For Your Own Good.” If we follow them, we will not be disappointed with an outcome.

These instructions are meant to help us have better, fuller, safer lives, just as were all the instructions our parents gave us when we were small children and on into our young adulthood. Then, at some magical age we turned off our hearing and set out on our pathways in life feeling that we were free from all those directions that seemed to keep us from tasting the fullness of life. Some of us kept one foot planted in the ideals our parents had given us while others of us wandered far a field. But, for most of us, there came a time in life when we woke up and smelled the cappuccino and decided that we needed to look somewhere for further instruction if we were to have the fullness of life we wanted. We suddenly, or gradually, came to the understanding that all those instructions had, indeed, been for our own good no matter how much we might have resisted them.

At this point in life, many turn to religion to help them sort things out. This can be a very rich time of investigation and exploration of other faiths. We might be a little restless until we discover where it is we fit. Surprisingly, for most of us, it is in the faith system that we have grown up in as youngsters. Those of us sitting here have found that our base is in Christianity.

This week we begin to look at the Sermon on the Mount, found in the gospel of Matthew. There is another such sermon found in the gospel of Luke known as the Sermon on the Plain. Many scholars believe that these two sermons were not sermons at all but collections of the teachings of Jesus compiled by the authors of these two gospels. I know that when I read through the Sermon on the Mount I am renewed and refreshed and I am reminded of what it is that matters in life.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. Many call them the “be-attitudes” because they tell us what our attitudes should be if we are to find fullness of

life, if we are to find ourselves blessed. There are nine of them and they are a wonderful prelude to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

No less wonderful are the words we find in the prophet Micah. Micah's instructions seem to take many teachings from the Hebrew Scriptures and distill them down into a few simple words that will lead us to lives that are fuller and richer. He tells us to "do justice, love mercy or kindness and walk humbly with our God." I remember, years ago, in the course of my divorce, when the opposing counsel looked at me and said, "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." When he said that, I knew all would be well, and it was. They were words he lived by in his life. We became linked in an interesting way at that time and I will never forget that moment or that man and the way he did justice and loved kindness.

All of these words of wisdom are open to us and easily found in our Bible. They seek to guide and inform us in our foolishness and help us discover what is pure and true and right. Since we are creatures who possess free will, a good and gracious gift from our Creator, we can always choose to pay heed to these instructions or ignore them. We need to remember, however, that with our freedom, our free will, comes a great deal of responsibility. We are responsible for the direction our lives have taken. We cannot blame others or God when we find ourselves in places we do not want to be.

Paul was saying this to that messed up church in Corinth. He was reminding them that there was a better way if they could only set aside their selfish, foolish focus and understand the message Jesus had sought to bring them. They were not the wise ones having all the answers. They needed to seek the truth.

We know that when we have chosen to live by a basic set of instructions we are far better persons. It is not easy but the benefits are beyond measure. We understand that all those instructions were and are for our own good. We know that they require us to change our way of living and moving and having our being if we have wandered off the pathway and find life very unsatisfactory.

In the weeks to come, we will read the wisdom from the Sermon on the Mount and try to discover just how it fits in with who we are and where we are in life. We will learn new ways to cope with the world around us and the people in it –ways that can lead us all to a better place. These few chapters are a little instruction book that can bring us riches we may have lost sight of as we traveled life's roadway.

Amen