

*Extreme Makeover: If I Had a Hammer?*  
*Luke 13:31-35*  
*March 4, 2007*

Of all the tools in my new toolbox the one I am most afraid of is my hammer. There is such power in this little device. When I strike the nail in just the right spot with the right force it can be very effective in my building projects. At the same time I have lousy aim. I miss my target often. If I have my other hand in the wrong place, I can get injured. Yes, the hammer is my most fearful tool. I am in the second week of my Lenten Sermon series that I entitle, “Extreme Makeover.” In this toolbox I will begin equating this week these physical tools to the spiritual tools that we have to make over our lives in this season of Lent. You know our task is not a solitary one. It is not just about individual makeover. More importantly it is about making over our congregation, our community and our world. Do you believe that?

This hammer is like the spiritual tool of *prophecy*. A prophet is the mouthpiece for God. And the favorite subject for our God throughout all of the history of the people of God is social justice. Modern prophets – such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi – have been singly focused on doing justice. They have used the hammer of non-violent resistance to change the world. Bering Memorial UMC throughout its remarkable history has been about social justice and social action. We’ve been about serving the poor and marginalized, about caring for those sick with yellow fever, influenza, with HIV and AIDS. This is our legacy and our continued calling. In my sermon today my single focus will be on the role of the prophet in speaking for God in the world for the cause of social justice.

Today's gospel lesson comes from the book of Luke. Luke was more concerned with social justice than any of the other evangelists. Concern for social justice drips from every page of this wonderful gospel. Jesus claims this from his very first sermon in chapter four. He quotes the prophet Isaiah when he says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden." Our text this morning, like last week's and many of Jesus' sayings, is filled with metaphor and Biblical allusion. What happens in this scene? The Pharisees, the religious leaders, warn Jesus against Herod's plan to kill Jesus. Jesus responds with a prophetic vision of the real meaning of his calling. He refers to the "fox." The fox is clever and destructive. The fox is more than just the person of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee. The fox is a symbol for the evil forces that oppose God's justice and righteousness everywhere. Jesus looks back and he looks forward in time. A good prophet always does this. Jesus looks back to Psalm 118 (Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord), and to the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 22. Jeremiah warns the Kings of Judah that its house will become a "house of desolation." For they have not looked out for the widow, and the orphan and the stranger. They have ignored those who sit outside the gate at the margins of society. Because of this Judah will fall to Babylon and be exiled from their temple and their city. Their house will become utterly empty and destroyed. Jesus also looks forward a few days to Passion/ Palm Sunday when he rides into Jerusalem to great cries of "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." We also see Jesus' authentic compassion for the "children of

Jerusalem” whereby he compares himself to the loving hen gathering up its chicks in its wings.

Fundamentally this text concerns the role of the prophet and the call to social justice. To understand what Jesus means you need to understand the prophetic tradition in Israel. As I said before, to be a prophet is to be a mouthpiece of God. The refrain from Jeremiah and Isaiah is “thus says the Lord.” Jeremiah warns the last kings of Judah that they should be all about social justice. Jesus’ last words that precede this text is that the *first shall be last and the last shall be first*. Jeremiah says that unless those in power take care of the stranger, the orphan and the widow, that the house of David will become desolate – deserted, crumbling and empty of its meaning. The prediction, whether it is a future forecast or a present reflection upon the trouble that Judah has seen and now lives in exile, comes true in the destruction of the Temple (the center of their worship community), the loss of the land, and their exile to Babylon.

All prophecy looks forward and it looks back. The winds of time continually blow the dust of this book we call the Bible as we find new ways to apply its truths. If we are to apply the hammer of justice that Jesus demands in our own age, it seems to me that we need to wrestle with three questions:

1. What is the “fox” in our community?
2. Who are the “children of Jerusalem” whom God is gathering into her arms?
3. What must we do or risk exile and desolation in our house?

Let’s look at these one at a time. First, who is the “fox” in our community? If we generalize the “fox” to be any evil which pulls us away from God’s purposes we have to

admit that there are many foxes in our community. There is homelessness, drug abuse, hunger, neglect and abuse of the environment. The list goes on. There are simply too many foxes for us to chase! Indeed just as there is a Herod in every region of Israel, there are many “Herods” with whom we can do battle. The proper question for us is “who is the fox that we understand and are prepared to ensnare through the healing, curing powers of Jesus Christ here at 1440 Harold?” Largely we are a congregation of GLBT people. We understand the culture and the unique issues of this population within the larger culture. We also understand what it means to be at the margin. We understand what it means to be outside a locked gate, don’t we? So who is outside the gate in our neighborhood? The community that I suggest that we focus on is GLBT youth who feel the pressures of marginalization. The fox is those systems that keep GLBT youth from being the best that God intends them to be. They may have been rejected or somehow separated by parents filled with religious intolerance. They may have suffered from all kinds of abuse and neglect. They may be held captive by drugs and prostitution. They may lack life skills to pull back into a healthier way of living. All of these forces keep them locked out from healing and being whole.

The second question that we need to ask is, “Who are the children of Jerusalem whom God is gathering into her arms? *Young, at-risk youth who may fall victim to this marginalization.* Let’s face it. Young people are coming out earlier about their sexuality. That is a good thing. But once they come out they need to find support systems to cope with problems that they will face. They run a double risk of HIV and AIDS through intravenous drug use and unsafe sex practices. They need to form good relationships. They need affordable counseling and open, accepting youth peer groups.

They may need desperately to find a family of choice. The people of Bering have always been about holistic healing – mind, body and soul. GLBT youth need another option for socialization, acceptance and love than the bars. They need mentors who have worked through the issues they are facing.

The third and final questions is, “What must we do or risk exile and desolation in our house?” What makeover do we need to do as a listening congregation? We must put the nails in place that create a healing home for these youth. Later this summer we will build a *Habitat for Humanity*, in partnership with three other United Methodist Churches. That is a great project that I am totally committed to. More about that in later sermons... But inspired by the prophet Jeremiah and the prophetic words of our Lord, I envision another house. I envision a house I call “The Open Gate.” I don’t know yet if this is literal place or a resource center. It will offer hope and healing. It will offer support groups, individual counseling, life-skills training. Mentors can meet with their youth in this safe place. Volunteers will be able to use their gifts in decorating, providing meals, and in chaperoning in this place. At some point it might offer full residence services. What I do sense very strongly is that there are people in this room who feel a deep calling toward being a part of the solution to this problem. I sense deeply that there are people in this church and I hope in this service that must be about this healing ministry. I pray that God will lift you up, encourage you, and strengthen you to step forward into this much-needed ministry.

This beginning of this vision is already beginning to take shape in what is called “Project U.” It is a support group that meets within the BSN community on Tuesday nights. Let me tell you a little bit about Project U. It’s facilitator, Tommy Calzadias, is

here today. Tommy can tell you many stories of teens who have found no other place to turn – rejected by parents, ridiculed by classmates – they have run away and find their way to the Montrose community. They worry about the most basic needs – food, shelter, and caring, compassionate love. Project U has become the safe place where they realize that they are not alone and there are people who do really care about them. This is the seed of my vision for a place where GLBT teens can become whole and healed – physically, mentally, and spiritually. We can take the next step as a faith community if we are willing to open the gates of our hearts to the ones who God has prepared us through the experiences of our lives to find hope and healing.

Here the words again of Jesus. This time hear the words that I believe he wants to say: “how long I have waited to gather my children of Houston as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Finally they have come home to be with me as I have always dreamed.”

Amen.