

Shoeless Joe

Micah 6:8-13

“Be the change.”

First in the Series, The Gods Must be Crazy.

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Say It Ain't So!

1920, and the cry could be heard from children and fans in the streets of Chicago, “Say it ain't so, Joe!” That's what they presumably said when Shoeless Joe Jackson was kicked out of baseball forever with seven of his Chicago White Sox teammates. They were accused of throwing the 1919 World Series for payoffs from gamblers, and if they did, they might have had good reason. They were the best team in baseball and yet were undeniably the poorest paid. It seemed every time owner Charles Comiskey promised them a bonus, he'd cheat them out of it in the dirtiest and most demeaning of ways. Many would say Comiskey had it coming.

But baseball has said through the years that the players crossed the line anyway. They compromised the game's integrity. What they did was wrong; so wrong that Shoeless Joe would never play professional ball again. This outfielder who has the third-highest batting average ever, who averaged 16 triples a year and closed out his last year of major league play with 74 extra base hits, would never be inducted into the Hall of Fame. He still has a following that calls for his redemption and movies like *Field of Dreams* and *The Natural* still lift the prayer he might someday be taken in. “Say it ain't so, Joe!”

The broken trust and dashed hopes sound much like the headlines of today. Seven years ago, when the economy was hardly in as bad of shape as it is today, Enron admitted it improperly inflated earnings and hid debt through business partnerships.¹ WorldCom announced that it had disguised \$3.8 billion in expenses.² Xerox announced that it misreported sales of equipment and service contracts that made revenues look almost \$2 billion better than they were. The list of additional companies that were investigated was staggering: Tyco; Rite Aid; Qwest; Kmart; at least a dozen others plus the auditing and consulting firms like Arthur Anderson.³ Even Martha Stewart, Queen of kitchen and craft projects, was convicted of obstruction of justice and insider trading.

You'd think that the marketplace would have learned its lesson until last October when the stock market fell a good 20% and our pension funds, our investments and our

property were all suddenly worth a lot less. Foreclosures were up sharply. Some lending institutions and insurance companies failed; others would have were it not for a rescue by tax-funded government bailouts. Businesses went out-of-business and lots and lots of people lost their jobs.

When it became apparent that we all were in a mess, the best that could be said is that there was *excessive moral hazard*, a condition in which agents and their companies protected from consequences from reckless risk-taking are willing to take those risks, while those left holding the bag and not in-the-know would not.⁵ But we found out it was mostly worse than just naïve risk-taking when news analyses revealed the extent of personal greed that brought the crisis about it the first place and then even took personal advantage of our bailout money after it happened.

Say it ain't so, AIG. Say it ain't so, executives taking bonuses and excessive severances while people are losing paychecks and homes. "Say it ain't so, Martha Stewart!" The gods must be crazy: there goes the economy. It seems like the world is falling apart!

Integrity

Cheating and greed in business are nothing new. It goes back before October. It goes back before 2002. It even goes back before 1919, 'old as time, perhaps. Micah the ancient prophet steps forward and says with the words of God:

"Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths."

701 B.C.: and the same stuff went on. Accounting procedures may have been different. But the human heart and the capacity to cheat and exploit for personal gain were no different then than it apparently was for Bernie Madoff. Scales were literally tipped so that merchants could overcharge or under-report, whichever was to their advantage. In the process, the poor were oppressed, the public was swindled, foreign traders transporting goods through the country could expect to be cheated without recourse or protection; the dishonest rich became richer; and innocent, honest folk were financially taken down.

How could Judah help but fall apart? Just when enemies marched toward the gates of Jerusalem, the fabric of Jewish society was unraveling by a fraying trust. The angry warning of Micah 6:13 (which I didn't include in this morning's reading) is not the threat of a malicious God; it is the revelation of the God of natural consequences.

Micah might otherwise have said, “You speak of being a righteous people, a holy nation? Your ‘business as usual’ is nothing but corruption. Say it ain’t so, Hezekiah!”

You’d think the whole world has gone bad; but it really took only a small minority to do the damage we’re dealing with today. Perhaps it was only 2%, to 10% of the workplace: a small portion, leaving a vast majority of honest and hard working people. One thinks of the adage, “One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.”

A *Wall Street Journal* reader writing to its Internet editors aptly said, “What, pray tell, is ‘corporate greed’? The scandals are indeed corporate, but greed is a human trait. Nobody ever speaks of ‘corporate love’ or ‘corporate shame’. Corporations are incapable of greed, but they can be abused by greedy individuals.”⁶

It was them, I have no doubt. But I also think they had some help. Some think the extent of Shoeless Joe’s sin was that he simply *looked the other way*.

Look the other way. ‘Hard not to do when the pressure’s on. After all, who wants to lose a job and all for which they’ve worked? One of my colleagues told me about a member of her church who struggled with the environment of his job, but explained to her that he was bound by “the golden handcuffs”. I later learned that this is a common term that speaks of a trap: stock options and bonuses can amount to a significant portion of an employee’s compensation; all which would be lost if that worker were to leave the company.

I know that there’s enormous pressure many of you work. How narrow is the distance is between your rock and your hard place.

You are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, you have a livelihood, often a family to support, and bills to pay. On the other hand there’s the truth of who you are: a child of God who cares about doing justice and seeing righteousness prevail. And no matter how you cut it, it’s hard to be one person here and at home and another person at work. Whatever isn’t right there will affect you. So, between this rock and that hard place, what can you do?

I believe the answer is simple, but also may be one of the bigger challenges a Christian in today’s world has to confront.

The prophet proclaimed, “He 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?”

Jesus asked, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit the soul?”

If faith is real and if the grace of God is to be trusted, you have the power to make a difference...to change the world. It's people, after all, who make the world what it is. It will be people, empowered by a redemptive God who will transform it. If 10% or less can create a global economic crisis, what would happen if somebody inspired the 90% or more to insist on honesty and justice? What would happen if somebody would be courageous enough to be a catalyst for change, not imposing it on others, but just living it out *openly*?

A business professor at the University of Michigan suggests that this is not only possible, but that it has been done. He cites Jesus and Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Martha Rae and a score of others, both CEO's and commoners, who have been change agents, who have been so inner-directed and outward focused that they instigated the transformation of organizations, countries, and even the life of the world.

He says that *transformation* tends to be stimulated by a person who is committed to a significant purpose, living out the change they envision.⁷ I know it wouldn't be easy when the expectation is to cook books and make the sale no matter what. Yet, as long as you just play along and look the other way, there will be no change.

Jesus told us to live in the new reality of the Kingdom of God. It is when one insists on openly *balancing* the scales that a culture of justice is given birth.

You may well be a change agent already. Just be visible.

What would have happened if Shoeless Joe and openly said, “No?” Would he have been included in the Hall of Fame? Would Pete Rose have been spared the temptations later to come because heroes that went before him had shown strength instead of weakness? Would today's players be a little less bulky in muscle but stronger in moral fiber by seeing the cheat in steroids? Would the boys and girls they inspired be inspired less to win at any cost but more to integrity no matter what?

Would our world have been the better for it? Would it be closer to the way God dreamed?

If you want the world of business to change: whatever you do ***be the change***. So in the end we can all say it ain't so.

References

- [1] The Wall Street Journal Online, as of 11:59 p.m., Thursday, June 20,2002
- [2] Amy Baldwin, Washingtonpost.com, Wednesday, June 26, 2002; 1:27 PM
- [3] op cit, The Wall Street Journal Online.
- [4] op cit, Amy Baldwin
- [5] "Subprime Mortgage Crisis", *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subprime_mortgage_crisis. As updated, July 20, 2009.
- [6] Wall Street Journal Online poll, June 20, 2002 Guest
- [7] Robert Quinn, *Change the World*, Jossey-Bass 2000, ch. 8 pp174-175