



SUNDAY SERMON

Getting the Question Right

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1 to 12.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "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. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Loving God, we gather this morning hungry and thirsty for your righteous guidance. Continue to fill us as only you can. In the Holy name of the Triune God. Amen.

A love letter from Jesus. A wink from God. A full body embrace from the Holy Spirit. That's what this morning Scripture passages feel like to me. Folks, I don't know about you but if there was ever a Sunday morning I needed to hear both The Beatitudes and Micah chapter 6:1-8 it is certainly this morning. With a self-proclaimed Darth Vader* pulling the strings in the White House and Refugees stranded abroad-I am heartsick. This is not the America I recognize. This is not the dream that Martin spoke of. And this certainly is not the way of Jesus the Christ.

If there was any doubt, this morning's Gospel puts that to rest. We hear Jesus' voice this morning reminding us that "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 peacemakers for they will be called children of God" ... These are not the words of someone interested in building walls or denying God's blessing to those who really need it ... these are the words of someone instigating kindness and pointing to freedom and love as the way of God.

You know this. I know this. Now how do we get the rest of the world, and especially our fellow Christians to know this ... well that is a good question. To help us answer this question let us go back to our Hebrew Testament reading.

Micah struggled with a similar question in his own time—the question of how to get the faithful to actually listen to the wisdom of God rather than the swirl of voices telling them to do otherwise.

Micah's time period was just as chaotic as our own time, maybe even more so. He was a prophet living in the 8th century BCE from the Southern Kingdom of Judah and his kingdom was in trouble. Their northern Sister Kingdom, Israel had just been invaded by the Assyrians, who took over their lands and completely destroyed the capital city of Samaria. As a result of Samaria's destruction Judah saw a huge influx of refugees in a time when Judah's own resources and way of life were already feeling threatened. In exchange for a semblance of independence the Assyrians had demanded exorbitant tributes be paid and according to Micah that burden fell disproportionately to the poor and the oppressed.

Continued

DATE

The Fourth Sunday
after the Epiphany
Sun., Jan. 29, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Amy Molina-Moore

READINGS

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
I Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Refugees, uncertainty about the future, disproportionate burden laid at the feet of the poor—sound at all familiar?

It's in this mix that Micah began to prophesy, Speaking to the people on behalf of Yahweh. Now a word about the Jewish prophetic tradition—Not just any one could be taken serious as a prophet—according to the rules laid down by Deuteronomy each prophet was to be tested according to whether their prophecies proved true. That the book of Micah survived and was handed down to us is remarkable. We value it because a group of elders somewhere, a long time ago verified it to contain truth.

This passage begins in the most remarkable of ways with the Lord asking the mountains and the hills to listen to the case and be the jury. Today we can't get people to agree on the benefits of using renewable resources but thousands of years ago God sets up creation as the arbiter of truth and no one bats an eye. But I digress. Let's go back to God's case. Almost pleadingly God asks "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" Then God starts to make his case by listing the ways that God has been faithful to his people—including saving them from slavery and bringing them to the promised land. In this depiction God is vulnerable and I would say even hurt. To this the people respond by asking how they could right the wrongs they've done—an excellent first step. But the list itself is a testament to just how out of sync humanity is with their creator. The list starts off realistic but then keeps escalating to the point that they eventually offer an abhorrent sacrifice of a firstborn—a practice long despised by Jews and deemed unsuitable to God since Abraham and Isaac.

Just then—when it seems that humanity and God are furthest apart Micah provides the answer to the ultimate question ... "and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" This answer changed the nature of the question. The question the people had been asking was what should we do to right the wrongs we've long committed ... when the question all along should have been who should we be in order to avoid doing the wrongs we've long committed.

Earlier I proposed a similar question, the question that has been on my heart for months has been what do I do to make sure that the world knows the Jesus I know. The Jesus who champions the cause of peace and mercy, the Jesus who is on the side of the lost, lonely and oppressed. This question is not wrong, there is much to do and there will be plenty to do in the weeks and months ahead. But Micah reminds me and all of us this morning that the most crucial part of sharing the Jesus we know with the world is not necessarily what we do ... but who we are while we're doing what we're doing.

We all know when we have received kindness because of an obligation, and when we have received kindness stemming from generosity and love. The same is true of our activism and works of justice. People can tell when we're sharing our gifts because of pity or self-righteousness ... they can also tell when we are motivated by justice and love for humanity and creation. My prayer for all of us is that we don't just impress or move people by our actions, but that we move them by the great compassion and love of Christ that radiates from all that we do.