

Sermon – January 29, 2017

*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?*

Micah 6:8

In the years since I became a priest I have tried very hard not to bring politics into the pulpit. I am fully aware of the power differential and the responsibility implied in the preacher's position. Many folks come to church assuming that the person in the pulpit has actually been called by God to speak, as validated by the approval and ordination of the institutional church. You listen because you either believe or want to believe that the preacher has some reasonable measure of innate intelligence, has studied the Holy Text, as well as Church doctrine, tradition and history. While you may disagree with some interpretation of a particular text or some observation or opinion expressed by the preacher rarely is the message so offensive that it shakes your faith or significantly alters your opinion of your overall Church experience. People do leave churches because they do not like the preacher but not so much because they do not agree with the sermon. Some folks just ignore the preacher altogether and attend because of the music or the liturgy. The sermon is just something they have to put up with to get to the good stuff.

Still, any preacher who is true to his or her call will try very hard to make the most of the time that those in attendance spend listening

to the message. So, if the preacher takes this responsibility seriously there will be those times when the prompting of the Holy Spirit requires that one make oneself a target for disagreement or perhaps even ridicule.

Whether we admit it or not we all come to this place with preconceived ideas about ourselves, about Jesus and about what God expects of those who profess the faith. Those ideas may or may not align with tradition, reason or even reality. Most of us see ourselves as either better or worse than we actually we are. In the same manner most of us also have various aspects of our religious traditions and doctrines that we embrace fully and other bits that disconcert us or with which we completely disagree. The truth is humans like to be comfortable and while we love it when someone praises our good deeds and gently instructs us in doing a bit better, no one likes it when the Holy Spirit becomes the bee under the bottom, forcing us to change in ways that challenge or even frighten us.

Modern watered-down theology aside, committing one's life to Christ and following in the way of Jesus was never supposed to be comfortable or easy. The abundant life is not about luxury or leisure, satiation or self-satisfaction. Following Jesus...in fact go back even further, before Jesus...following the will of God has always been countercultural, always difficult and often dangerous. This is because

it is rooted in opposing the powers that be and fighting one's own desire to possess and control. God has never accepted divided loyalties...."you cannot serve two-masters". If one wants to be right with God then the things of God must come first....before self...before family....before tribe....before state and before nation. We are to be residents of the Kingdom of God, which has nothing to do with national borders, personal possession or human might.

This is especially pertinent in the current political climate in this country and this world. We can argue all we want about the rationality of protecting one's own and looking to one's own interests before being concerned with those of others...but don't pretend that this has anything to do with Christianity or even Godliness. Intelligent, sober people will argue that Jesus' sermon on the mount was directed at individuals and not nations but what are nations but collections of individuals. Even the ancient prophets understood that God did not have two sets of rules for behavior...one for our personal lives and one for our civic lives. We are to seek after the will of God in all that we do and in all of the decisions that we make, personal and social.

This does not however mean that we are to force our religious beliefs on everyone else. None of us has a monopoly on Eternal Truth and our understanding of God is complicated by our personal cultural background and our lived experience. I don't pretend to understand the incomprehensible greatness of the Creator so I look to Jesus, who

came that we might learn to be in relationship with this same God who made us. Jesus called people to follow him. He didn't chase them down and bludgeon them into submission.

The prophet Micah sums up God's expectations of God's people beautifully. In the reading that we have today we hear the confused arguments of a people who at some level wanted to be in right relationship with God but who had their own ideas about what that meant. They couldn't have been more wrong. They were grateful for their deliverance from bondage in Egypt and they wanted to show God just how much. The problem was that they were a bloody and barbarous people who believed God to be bloody and barbarous as well. They wanted to offer the slaughtered and burned bodies of countless animals as sacrifice to express their devotion to God. At one point they even suggested that God might desire the offer of their children as sacrifice. "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Micah is very clear that they have missed the point of God's intention for God's people. He declares to them: "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?"

Be just....be kind....be humble. Pleasing God has always been simple. It's religious people who have tried to make it so complicated. Jesus'

message, both in his words and in his life was not a new one. It was the same thing God had been trying to say since the beginning of creation. But our thirst for power....our lust for violence....our greed and our selfishness keep getting in the way. We want it to be harder than it is because in our hearts we don't want to be kind....we don't want to believe that God loves all of creatures equally,... infinitely. We want to be better than someone else because deep down we believe that some people matter more than others. We believe "our people"....however we define that....matter more than anyone else. People who look like we do....or who believe like we do....or who were born in our country....or in our neighborhood....those who live in houses as nice as our own ....folks who are famous or wealthy or powerful....we have any number of ways to measure someone's worth and all of them suit as long as someone ends up worse off than we are.

Brother and sisters....this is not of God and no manner of rationalization or misinterpretation of Holy Text will make it righteous. If you want to know who has found favor with God then look no further than the Gospel lesson for today. In his sermon, Jesus tells us who is blessed by God...tells us who God favors... and it isn't who most people would expect.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the meek, blessed are

those who desire righteousness, ....the merciful, ...the pure in heart, Blessed are those who make peace and who are persecuted for the sake of the Gospel.

God will always be found with the very ones that the powerful of this world disregard. If you are looking for Jesus he will be always be found with the poor and the vulnerable, with the oppressed, with the refugee, with the weak and the despised. He will be present with the outcast and the broken, the prisoner, the suffering, the misunderstood. He will also be found with those who love and minister to the needy, the weak, the sick, the lonely, the stranger, the lost and the broken. Jesus is with those who feel compassion and whose hearts break for the pain of others.

At the beginning I mentioned the possibility that I might have to get political, despite my aversion to it. I think that in the coming days all people of good heart are going to have to get a little political. This is because the things that Jesus calls us to care about...the issues that we as faithful Christians are supposed to be concerned with have been politicized by those who would use them to divide and conquer us. I don't know what's going to happen but there may come a time when each of us will have to decide if he or she is going to walk the walk of faith or go along to get along. Seeking the truth and following Christ in a time of "alternative facts" and rampant self-interest may become increasingly difficult requiring strength,

courage and resilience.

I'm not saying that everyone is called to leave their families, their jobs and their homes to go into the wilderness of suffering to minister to the victims of war and violence...of environmental destruction and spiraling economic disparity. Some of you will be called to such radical faith but most of us will be called to minister in our everyday lives....to make peace in our neighborhoods....to create sanctuary in our homes and our churches....to feed the hungry on our doorstep... to tutor other folks' children who struggle in inadequate schools.... to visit the lonely,...to comfort the despairing, to offer opportunity and second chances...to forgive...to raise our voices in protest of injustice and to support leaders who make laws that create a just and healthy society for everyone.

Brothers and sisters there are a lot of arrogant, angry people out there in the world. Folks are making decisions from a dark and bitter place and compassion seems to have fallen out of fashion. Many people have decided that it is acceptable to do anything and everything in service to the self. They have taken a dangerous ideology and disguised it with a veneer of Christianity but at its heart it is idolatry of self and greed. This is of the devil and those who follow this false god will find no peace and will create a maelstrom of collateral suffering.

The way of God is the way of humility...the way of gentleness...the way of kindness. I beg you all: be gentle with each other, be gracious and civil. Don't let anger and despair make you forget who you are....make you forget whose you are. You are the beloved children of God, who loved you before you were born. You are the brothers and sisters of Jesus, God with us who loved us more than life and beyond death. We were created from love and created for love. Don't let bitterness kill compassion....don't let the darkness of despair shutter the light of Christ that shines in each of you. Yes, we must speak truth to power. Yes, we must stand against oppression and put the Christ's love into action. But at the same time we must be the purveyors of hope and the heralds of the Gospel.

Don't worry if people call you foolish for daring to openly follow Jesus in this work of love. The apostle Paul reminded us today that God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Our strength, our wisdom, our righteousness comes from Christ Jesus and through him we are sanctified and redeemed. Through him the whole world is sanctified and redeemed. The hard work of Salvation has already been accomplished. The call for us is to remember what has been done and remind others of the sacredness of all that God

has made. We are the keepers of the faith and the conduits of God's love in this world. It is a mighty call...a sacred task....a blessed life. May God make us ready for it. May God make us worthy of it.