

“Beatitude Made Flesh:  
Micah 6: 1-8, Matthew 5: 1-12  
Annual Meeting Sunday, January 30, 2011  
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The prophet Micah poses the question, “What does the Lord require?” This is not just something that kept Micah awake at night. This question continues to intrigue, fascinate and perplex the faithful today. In the face of injustice, in the face of inequity, in the face of a myriad of very real challenges we too might wonder, “What does the Lord require?” The prophet states it plainly: “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.” We think, “Yes, right on, do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, I like the way that sounds.” People have sold a million bumper stickers, coffee mugs and fridge magnets emblazoned with these inspiring words. Perhaps owning a mug with Micah’s wisdom and contemplating it as we drink our morning coffee, will help us to embody it. Then, we need only listen to the news to realize how truly difficult it is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God as Micah professes.

To make matters even more complicated the gospel lesson for today is the very familiar and much beloved Beatitudes. There are certain sections of the Bible that modern Western culture has found a way to tame. When we remove these portions of Scripture from their original context we rob them of their potency; they are oft quoted but not wholly understood nor followed. I think Micah’s wisdom and Jesus’ Beatitudes fall into this category of “watered down wisdom.” Perhaps if we can quote these passages of Scripture with conviction then they will automatically translate into faithful living. In the Sunday school classrooms of our youth we were once able to recite all the Beatitudes. I wonder how many of us could do that today. I know I would have a hard time, even though we just heard them read. The victory is not in naming them, but in living them.

The text we call the Beatitudes from Matthew’s gospel is the very, very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This ‘sermon’ is the first major teaching in Jesus’ ministry. For a first sermon, Jesus lays it all on the line. He is sure to ruffle a few feathers with his peculiar list of the “blessed ones.” Imagine if you were hearing Jesus preach for the first time. You have followed the crowd up this mountain because you are intrigued by this new teacher so many people are talking about. People are saying that men are leaving their jobs and their families to follow him. At a moment’s notice, they relinquish their attachment to worldly things to search for this new way of life he is preaching and teaching about. People are magnetically drawn to Jesus’ healing presence. You can’t wait to be part of the excitement..

Jesus begins this inaugural sermon with a flood of blessings. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, and the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for doing the right thing, and those who are reviled and persecuted on Jesus’ account. What is Jesus doing with this list of blessings and blessed people? The people he mentions seem like an odd bunch. Why would the meek or the persecuted or those who mourn be blessed? Are these not the very people that society looks down upon and deems lowly? Once again, Jesus turns secular values and the way most folks live on its head. It is tempting to think there are identifiable groups of people that fall into these distinct categories; a group of mourners or peacemakers or folks who are ‘poor in spirit’. There are no such groups. The only people Jesus is referring to is his followers, those who have come to hear him speak and will make the decision to follow or not to follow. Jesus is laying out a blueprint for action, a plan for behavior, and a reorientation of life for his followers, those who love God, the very ones he proclaims blessed.

I imagine the people who heard Jesus that day were as perplexed as we are. It doesn't feel good to be persecuted, but perhaps this is what happens when we "do justice." In our society the meek inherit nothing, yet this might be another way to describe those who love kindness. If you have ever suffered a great loss and have been captured by deep grief, you know what it is like to mourn. It is not possible to make it through such pain without God as your companion, walking humbly with you out of the darkness. The words of the prophet and the peculiar instruction of Jesus lay a foundation for kin-dom living. Their instructions seem foolish to those who do not believe.

The preacher Rick Morley says, "What Jesus is saying here is that *we* are meant to be the poor in spirit, full of humility, and wonder. We are to be willingly emotionally exposed and open enough to fully mourn, mourning the state of the world, the failures and losses of our brothers and sisters, and the loss of our own innocence. We are the ones who are to be meek, not seeking power by dominating others but attaining true power which is only found in the weakness and vulnerability of the cross of Christ. We are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, yearning for what is right, holy, and good from the deepest part of our souls. We are to be merciful not ruthless, pure in heart not corrupted, peacemakers not instigators, the persecuted instead of the persecutors, and reviled and despised not honored and exalted."

This much beloved passage no longer describes blessings upon some category of people to which we do not think we belong. They describe the way the Church is supposed to look in all its glory. Jesus hiked his people to the top of the mountain so that he could get their full attention and give them the skinny on what God was all about, what he was all about, what he expected them to be about. The Beatitudes are much more than some warm and fuzzy slogans we find on coffee mugs or bumper stickers. It is Jesus' mandate for life in the kin-dom of God. They describe who we are meant to be. When we live this way, we experience the blessings of God. That is not to say that kin-dom living is easy. In fact, we know it is not. There are many who heard this sermon and chose not to follow. There are many today who hear it and upon understanding what it really means, find it difficult to be faithful.

Jesus begins his public ministry with a bang. In the Sermon on the Mount, he presents a vision of subversive spirituality, ethics, and theology by pronouncing blessing, well-being, and privilege on those who, at first glance, appear to be at the margins of society and religious life. The writer Bruce Epperly says "each of the beatitudes lifts up those who would be judged as outsiders or ethically countercultural. Wealth, pleasure, possession, power, and ease do not insure the experience of blessedness. Rather, in the midst of challenge and trial, we can experience God's loving care. Further, all the beatitudes refer to interdependent relationships and not individualistic values: those who mourn know their vulnerability and dependence; those who seek peace recognize relationship as essential; the merciful imaginatively experience the pain and challenges of others; the humble know that their well-being is connected with the well-being of others; the persecuted know that they cannot stand on their own, but need divine grace and companionship to remain faithful. Our blessing arises out of our sense of solidarity with all creation and our recognition that God's grace is the source of every blessing."

Jesus does not just offer good advice for aspiring disciples. He is proclaiming the very framework for living within the beloved community. We were made to be in relationship with each other and God's creation. When the first disciples responded as boldly as they did, they formed a unique community of believers. They would not experience power as the world defined it. They would experience privilege as this new community would proclaim it. Their understanding of wealth would be transformed by the one who would

model for them a new way of living, where those who seemed to have nothing would be truly blessed. In and through this new community they would discover who they were and what God required of them. The words of the prophet became their marching orders “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Today’s scriptures call us to a holistic, life affirming faith that joins theology, spirituality, ethics and social responsibility. They are the blueprint for kin-dom living. If we wonder as a church if we are being faithful to God’s call, we need to look no further than today’s lessons. True discipleship happens when we embody justice, kindness and humility. True discipleship is the beatitude made flesh. Micah teaches us that it is not about winning God’s favor but responding to God’s grace. Whenever we do this faithfully, we will be blessed.

As we gather for our annual meeting it is a perfect time to reflect on our discipleship. Those who have accepted the call to serve in the life and ministry of the church now know what criteria God puts forth for your work; to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with God. God calls us to be authentic, to experience the full cost and joy of discipleship, to be vulnerable, to risk speaking the truth, and to allow the Holy Spirit to take you to places you had never considered going. Blessed are we. Amen

Sources:

Rick Morley, “Litany for the Citizens of Heaven,” reflections on Epiphany 4/A, January 30, 2011.

Bruce Epperly, “Commentary on The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany,” Process Theology Website, January 30, 2011.