

January 29, 2023  
Epiphany 4-A  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Readings: Micah 6: 1-8, Psalm 15, Corinthians 1:18-31, Matt 5: 1-12

Today all across the church many parishes are having their annual meeting. Our readings this morning are a good corollary, or perhaps exhortation about our mission and relationship with God. In the annual meeting we talk a lot about the nuts and bolts of our common life together, but these readings are the 'meta' message from which everything should draw its purpose and inspiration.

Micah was one of what are referred to as the 12 'minor prophets' and the last book in the Hebrew scriptures or 'Old Testament'. They were called 'minor prophets' mostly because they were shorter in length than the 'major' prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations and Daniel, which were longer books of the same prophetic style of writing. Micah was written probably towards the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and was a contemporary of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos. His prophetic work coincided with the Assyrian defeat of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and during the initial threat to Judah, the southern kingdom. Hezekiah was king in Judah, and was a good king who did much to reform temple worship and bring the people back to Yahweh and to bring worship back to the temple in Jerusalem, which called for a lot of animal sacrifice.

This little portion of Micah is interesting in that it employs a common technique of the prophets, essentially depicting a cosmic courtroom: Yahweh is the prosecutor, the mountains and foundations of the earth are the jury, and the people of Israel are on trial. Notice how God the prosecutor lays out his case against them by recounting all that he has done for them---he brought them out of slavery (Egypt) and sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam before them (nice that he included Miriam – very unusual). Then he made reference to some stories how he helped deliver the promised land to them and overthrew the current inhabitants. Then the prophet jumps in and in a mocking way speaks on behalf of the nation wondering how much sacrifice will please God: burnt offerings, thousands of rams, rivers of oil poured out as an offering to God, or maybe the first born children? This, of course, is all meant as sarcastic set up to his ultimate

answer. But, it should be remembered that the sacrifice of 'first fruits' was a common sacrifice in many religions and endured among the Hebrews---animals, fruit, grain, olive oil – but not children...especially not after the horrible story of Abraham and Isaac. The Hebrews outlawed child sacrifice and stood out among neighboring peoples in this way.

But Micah eventually gets to what Yahweh really requires of a faithful people: to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God'. Micah was speaking to a people who thought maybe if they just followed the reforms of Hezekiah and did temple worship and sacrifice correctly then God would be happy and protect them from the Assyrians. But Micah, like many of the prophets, starts telling the people it is not enough just to do worship right, there is a deeper more profound ethical relationship to God and the world that Yahweh really wants.

This kind of tension still exists in the church and among believers---the kind of ethic that says, 'well, if I just go to church and do all the rituals correctly, then I'm good, right?' The prophets, 8 or 9 centuries before Jesus, began to steer the people away from just cultic correctness to a true faith in God based in relationship with God and embodying what Christians call the 'beloved community'. Jesus' teaching echoes this when he is asked which is the greatest commandment and he replies, 'to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and mind, and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself.' You can hear early murmurings of this kind of teaching in Micah's: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

The readings in Corinthians 1 and in Matthew push this teaching in slightly different ways. Paul's writing is all about the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the cross. He reminds us that the wisdom of this world is not the wisdom of God, but foolishness. He reminds us that historically the Jews were always looking for signs and wonders to believe in God or to believe the person was from God [remember how Jesus resisted this temptation from Satan in the wilderness when Satan challenged him to perform magic to prove his power], and that Greek civilization bowed down to the search for wisdom. For both of these groups the cross and Christ's crucifixion were just pure folly and were neither the manifestation of the power or the wisdom of God. It was just pure capital punishment for a criminal that Rome condemned. But, as Paul says, the cross, this stumbling block to Jews and Gentiles, is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The whole idea of self-sacrifice for others was not something that was thought wise or powerful. Oh, to be sure, there were ethical debates in all religions and cultures about caring for the poor and widow, etc., but to do so at one's own expense or harm was not thought to be wise or powerful. This Christ on the cross was just nonsensical to most people. But, again, as Paul says: "But God chose what is foolish in 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." The radical message of the gospel of Jesus is that we will never succeed at appeasing God through our own work and efforts, but that God's love for us is so comprehensive and awesome even to the point of self-sacrifice in love. And for this, we can never boast, but we must live forever grateful, and follow his example.

The passage from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is the powerful teaching from the mouth of Jesus that gives further examples of the kind of people God is blessing. This passage of course is called *The Beatitudes* because each little statement begins with 'blessed are'. We let these little sayings wash over us in a haze of sentimentality now, but they were fairly startling to the people of his day. Think of Jesus saying this to you if you were a zealot in the crowd expecting this guy to help raise a rebellion against Rome – the traditional type of role the Messiah was expected to play.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.* The Greek here, as in the gospel of Luke, which just stops at 'poor', really does refer to poverty; but more than that, it refers to the despised and oppressed, and the simple poor who count on so many others and God to survive. These are the ones who suffer so much in this life, but the kingdom of God belongs to them.

*Blessed are those who mourn* may have many different levels of meaning. If you have mourned, you know the pain of loss and longing for the lost. If you are compassionate, you know how important it is to reach out to those who mourn. And, if you have really opened your heart to God, you know what it is to mourn your own failures.

The third beatitude, *blessed are the meek*, may sound something like the first beatitude, but it has a slightly different meaning. The Greek word means 'goodwill toward others, and reverent obedience to God'. Again, if you were a zealot in Jesus' day, this is not what you wanted to hear. Jesus calls us to a Godly humility.

The fourth beatitude speaks of *those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. Righteousness is a way of saying right relationship with God and other people. Can you remember times when you were really hungry or thirsty? Can you apply that to your relationship with God?

In the fifth beatitude we hear about *the blessing of being merciful*. There is so much wrapped up in this word, but it is the heart and soul of expressing God's love in the world as Jesus showed us from the cross and taught us in the prayer he taught us: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

*Blessed are the pure in heart* is a beautiful phrase for which we can both shrink from the condemnation of our conscience and lift us to an aspirational challenge. 'Heart' in the scripture really refers to your whole personality – mind and soul – your 'spiritual ontological' nature as it were. Those who are pure in heart really exhibit in their lives a godliness that is not forced or feigned, but just seems to ooze out of them. They truly see God.

The last 2 beatitudes, *blessed are the peacemakers* and *blessed are the persecuted* almost seem like opposite sides of the same coin. How can anyone who calls themselves Christian not feel the joyful burden of being a peacemaker when it was one of the most common things Jesus wished for us, 'peace be with you' he so frequently said, and one of the last things he gave us as in John's gospel... 'my peace I give unto you.' But peacemaking can take on many faces. Not only is it something to do after the fact of an offense or harm, but good peacemakers try to get out ahead of danger between persons and nations. Along with being a good peacemaker is the wise advocacy for justice – as in the old saying, 'no justice, no peace!'. And for this, sometimes, those who love God and try to follow in the path of all these beatitudes will indeed be persecuted. But for the faithful, persecution is not the end of the story. There is a peace that passes all understanding when we live in the peace of God that renders persecution impotent.

Modern hymn (Hymnal 661):

*The peace of God, it is no peace,  
But strife closed in the sod,  
But brothers [let us] pray for but one thing,  
The marvelous peace of God.*

So, it is hard to not recite these beatitudes and be trite, or get lost in the haze of pious platitudes, but yet they describe both an ethic and an orientation in life that reflect, as Jesus taught, the very soul of God. To the first century Palestinians the

'wisdom' of them was inscrutable; to up and coming Wallstreet Execs and Hollywood A-listers they are also looked on as folly – antithetical to making a name for yourself and carving out a bigger piece of the pie. And that's what the Romans thought of Jesus on the cross – useless, folly; but as Paul said, 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

In our annual meeting let us remember that in all our doings Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection gave us an example and the frame of reference for our mission in our parish and in this community: to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.'