

Bible Study
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
January 29, 2017

[RCL] Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:1-8

God is clearly disappointed in Judah's lack of faith in action in this passage from Micah who prophesied in late 8th BCE to the elites of Jerusalem. It comes at a time when temple worship was at an all-time high, their coffers overflowing. And yet, there existed huge disparities in the social fabric of the kingdom. Micah's voice is one that speaks out loudly against the injustice of land-grab schemes that exploited subsistence farmers, forcing them into survival loans with administrative elites, and leading to loss of land inheritances, creating a class of indentured peasants. "It's just business", the people say. "Aren't we meeting our temple obligations and then some? God, what *more* do you want from us?"

It's surprising how easy it can be to be lulled into believing we are meeting our end of the bargain with God, simply because that's what we believe. Our pledge is paid on time; we come to worship without fail. Those actions *are* important as faithful members of our churches, but God shakes us free from our amnesia to remember we are also called to be faithful members of our communities and the world. Inaction in the face of injustice makes us complicit in those wrongs. Putting our faith into action, "walking the walk" in step with God and our neighbor is the "more" that is asked of us.

- What are the things we offer up to God as evidence of our faith?
- How can we transform our experience and participation in Sunday liturgy beyond the door of the church where it truly becomes the "work of the people"?
- If we recognize practices in our society that prey on the most vulnerable among us, how might we as Christians respond?

Psalm 15

Who is worthy to enter into the temple? What are our credentials? What certifies our internal purity? This is the opportunity for reflection the psalmist offers to us as we seek an audience with the Holy One. The evidence we are asked to show is not focused on God directly, but rather through the lens of our interactions with others children of God.

Listed in the foundational qualities of those living a blameless life: truth telling, rejecting gossip and rumors, making it our business to put emphasis on the well-being of others, and reliance on God in all things - we can recognize our own Baptismal vows. This is not a badge we proudly display at the temple gates for proper ritualistic practice, but our evidence of living an ethical life. Engaging practices such as the Ignatian Examen or the 10th (daily review) and 11th (prayer and meditation) steps of the Twelve Steps of AA can be helpful tools for regular self-examination and for seeking God's guidance as we seek to abide in the Holy dwelling.

- How are we actively living out our Baptismal vows in ways that support our efforts to live "a blameless life"?

- What practices of self-examination are present in your life today? How is God present for you in them?
- We might also pause to ask ourselves where and how the psalmist points us toward examining where our own personal and societal actions may serve to include or to exclude others from full and joyous participation in the community. Is the price for their entrance different from what we ourselves expect to provide?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” 1Cor 1:25

It is intriguing to think about God as “The Fool”. The role of the fool in Shakespeare’s plays is much more than that of the man with the funny hat who plays the idiot, bumbling around, and amusing others at his own expense. The character of the fool is often employed to point to the absurdity of those in power and to introduce subversive themes to a plot. *“That of course, is the great secret of the successful fool; that is, that he is no fool at all.”* (Isaac Asimov)

Paul is spending all the equity he has garnered with the Corinthian community to unite them in the reality of God’s great foolishness enacted by Christ’s death on the Cross. Followers of the gospel Paul preached and taught are being confused and drawn away to follow dynamic preachers with a message more appealing than the embarrassment and shame of the crucifixion. Paul’s concern is not for himself but for the salvation of the beloved community who are diverted from their devotion in the God whose death on the cross and resurrection is the ultimate counterintuitive subversion.

- What are some compelling messages preached by “experts” in our society that might draw us away from God’s central hopes and purposes for us?
- Is Paul inferring we should disregard the gifts of wisdom and discernment we have been given by God?
- In what ways are we called to be God’s countercultural fools?

Matthew 5: 1-12

Jesus’ teachings in this prelude to the Sermon on the Mount are specifically directed to his apostles. The phrases beginning with “Blessed are” are very familiar to us as modern day Christians; so familiar we may have a representation of them hanging on a wall in our homes. But we are far removed from the context in which they were delivered. At the time Matthew was writing the account of the Master’s words, his listeners would have understood the very real and present turmoil that Jesus’ followers were experiencing as a minority community of believers living under an oppressive regime. They would have embraced the consolation Jesus offered and understood being “Blessed” as their inclusion in the coming Kingdom when Christ will return to bring justice and peace.

A beatitude often misinterpreted in our own contemporary reading of the scripture refers to “those who mourn.” Rather than referring to the loss of a loved one in death, Matthew’s contemporaries would have been distressed, “poor in spirit”, by the injustice, inequality and violence of life in the Roman Empire, conditions far from the hopes of God for his people. Likewise, “the meek” are not those who simply allow themselves to be walked upon by the strong, but instead, because they are humble, they are open to and welcome their reliance on God, insuring their place in the new order.

- Where in our common life might mourning and lament be helpful responses?
- How might practicing humility before God and others be an empowering force in your life?
- Is there a beatitude you find meaningful in your own life? Why?

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Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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