

"It's Is Never About What YOU'VE Done"
+ Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany +
Micah 6:1-8, I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
February 2, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day.

I've been on more than one jury and listened to some frightening testimony and compelling closing arguments but today's message from the prophet Micah has God summoning hills and mountains to be the jury and the prophet like a prosecuting attorney lays out the case of God versus His people. It is as if you can see God pacing back and forth, asking in agony, "what have I done to you?" and "In what have I wearied you?"

Of course what Micah went on to record doesn't seem to have much to do with us, since we weren't directly rescued from slavery in Egypt, but those questions from God still haunt us as we, like Israel, are confronted with a gracious history of God's loving-kindness that we all too often take for granted. Truth be told there is not enough time or adequate words to truly thank God for all that God has done and is doing for us each day. To recognize that can only inspire silence because there is no defense, no real excuse for our lack of gratefulness and lack of response by thankfulness and praise in word and in deed, by showing mercy and grace to others. The best we have is, in true repentance, to make a promise together and as individuals to change.

Micah tells us what that change looks like: "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." And if we're still in the dark and need a few more specifics, the Psalm for today, Psalm 15 lays them out:

Do what is right, and speak the truth from your heart; do not slander with your tongue, do no evil to your friends, nor take up a reproach against your neighbors; do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Add that list to the Gospel and it would seem we have a huge "beatitude boost" for blessed behavior and a "DO THE RIGHT THING!" theme for the sermon but remember the Prayer of the Day? Remember the words, "Give us such a hunger and thirst for justice, and perseverance in striving for peace, that in our words and deeds the world may see the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord?" You see, it's never going to be about what we've done – it's all about Jesus – that other's might see the light and life of what God has done for us through God's one and only Son.

No, we will never do justice justly enough, honestly love being kind to others enough or walk humbly enough to make us fit to walk with God – that only comes as a gift through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. And, since we're confessing here, can you really say you've led a blameless life, you've always done what's right, have you always spoken the truth from your heart as the psalmist suggested?

I didn't think so. Neither have I. Whether in Matthew or in Luke, as we customarily find them, these Beautiful Beatitudes are a bust, if we come to them actually believing we can accomplish them! I mean, everybody wants to be "blessed" but who wants to be poor in spirit or mourning or meek or hungry or persecuted? And who of us is "pure (enough) in heart" to see God or so perfect a peacemaker that we deserve to be called children of God? None of us! Not me. Not you. Not anyone. I tried so hard to come up with a good sermon title, but ended up, despite my best efforts, with titles that were completely and utterly backwards until I finally settled on, "It's Is Never About What YOU'VE Done." You see, the so-called Beatitudes – perhaps the most famous of all of Jesus' sermons are the hardest things for a preacher to preach without botching the job because they are not a shopping list of good deeds and definitely not what you must be and what you must do in order for God to like you or me.

Maybe that seems painfully obvious to you but looking at this famous sermon of Jesus I had to think of two notes about the text from a far better preacher than myself: 1. Never, ever, turn the Gospel into Law. 2. Never think of the Beatitudes as obtainable by trying to embrace the message because you're really being called by them to embrace the Messenger – embrace Jesus.

Let me explain. The Gospel is an accomplished fact. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life." We have nothing to do with it, except to receive it as the gracious gift it is. The Gospel is all God's doing. We bring nothing to it.

But we often turn it into Law because it is so easy to do. Christians load a long list of "should" and "should not" items on their shoulders in the mistaken assumption that Jesus' death carries with it a bill we can repay by our good behavior. We can't. We cannot return the favor. We cannot put ourselves on an equal footing with Jesus because nothing, nothing, compares to the cross and what He accomplished there. And when we try, we take the Gospel, the Good News, and turn it into Bad news, into a set of expectations we cannot possibly fulfill.

And worse, we embrace the message and ignore the Messenger as if any words we speak or deeds we do could be more powerful than Jesus – the WORD made flesh who has accomplished our salvation for us. Of course we want to be blessed. And yes, we have been poor in spirit and I know each time I've been poor in Spirit I have met the riches of Jesus there – in the Word, in remembering my baptism, in the feast of the Lord's table – in the touch and embrace of a messenger sent from God in a brother or sister. We have, each of us, mourned for people or opportunities lost and Jesus is there to give us new life and lead us into new hope and promise. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is the desire to become more like Jesus to more fully live in God's goodness and grace. Merciful people getting mercy sounds good but that means being so low, so hurt, so in need, to have hurt ourselves and others so that we have needed mercy and, unworthy, received it. That, I believe, helps us to see others in a new way, to, with a pure heart seek peace between people in the midst of the pain and chaos that surrounds us and to be God's messenger and arbiter of peace. But arbiters of peace are most often persecuted in the process – certainly Jesus

was! Should we be in that position well – it is still all about Jesus - the Message, not us – we're just the messenger. "It's Is Never About What YOU'VE Done" it's about Jesus, first, last and forever. That's Gospel. That's Good News.

The "foolishness of the cross" is that God knows us through and through, the good, the bad and the ugly in each of us, and yet chooses to love us to life in Jesus. God knows we don't have to make ourselves "poor in spirit" or "mourning" or "meek" or "hungry for righteousness" because we already are. And guess what? God's the one who makes us merciful and pure in heart and peacemakers. And if that's what numbers us among the persecuted prophets who have preceded us, so what? We belong to our Good and Gracious God. Nothing else matters.

And if God so loved us, don't you think God's the One who will also guide us? Just think of all the ridiculous rules that been made "in the name of Christ" over the centuries as people have favored the message over the messenger. "Eat this. Don't eat that. Don't dance. Don't drink. Don't play cards. Only Fish on Fridays and don't shop on Sundays." Jesus didn't preach the Beatitudes to give us a list of things to do – He didn't come to simply change your behavior but to change you/change me – renew/rebirth us as children of God. The Beatitudes always point us to Jesus who took an instrument of torture and death something so foolish and so wise as a cross and through it made the way for us to be changed for eternity. Amen.

Now may God's peace that surpasses all human understanding bless us with Heavenly wisdom as we follow the One who saved us by His cross until He comes again to take us to the heaven He has prepared for all who trust in His salvation and love! Amen.