



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany IV

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

What the Lord Requires

Who knew that, throughout the history of Biblical religion, prophets and psalmists – read, poets and songsters – have articulated entry requirements necessary to fully participate in the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus?

Take Psalm 15. Likely written before there even was a Temple atop Mount Zion in Jerusalem, it asks the pivotal question: “Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? who may abide upon your holy hill?” The people are still worshipping the God of the Exodus in a tabernacle, or tent. Now we imagine that, when it came time for worship, everyone was—and always had been—welcomed. “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!”

But this is not at all how Psalm 15 depicts things. There we see that, before one can enter the tabernacle, one must already be engaged in the kind of life that reflects the God in whose image we have been created—a God who is merciful, slow to anger, compassionate, and abounding in steadfast love. So the psalmist lists the qualities one must have to worship this God: live a blameless life, speak truth from the heart, speak no evil toward others, do no evil nor heap contempt on one’s neighbor, reject all wickedness, keep one’s word, don’t take bribes against the innocent, lend money fairly, and honor those who fear and love the Lord.

It’s all relational. How we behave in community outside the tent of meeting matters. It turns out that what it takes to enter God’s sanctuary is a very non-liturgical affirmation: to worship God in an authentic manner, one must first be compassionate and just with others! All others. Just as the Lord God has been compassionate and just with all of us. As Jesus sums it up: Love God and love your neighbor.

Writing some 800 years before the time of Christ, the prophet Micah envisions the Lord God putting the faithfulness of the covenant community on trial. We would do well to note who is in the jury box: creation itself—mountains, hills, and the “foundations of the earth.” After a recitation of all the Lord God has done for the covenant people throughout the ages, again the question is put forward: With what shall we come to worship before the Lord? Will the Lord be pleased with burnt offerings, calves, rams, thousands of rivers of oil? “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” That is, should we double down on all the standard requirements of the Temple liturgies? Will our

performance in worship itself be sufficient to pay for the damage we have inflicted on one another and on the environment who sits in the jury box? The question is more familiar than it might seem. As a church, do we believe that if we perform all the niceties of the liturgy, have the proper vestments and hangings, use the correct texts and hymns of the season, say all the appointed prayers, make the offerings, and so on, then we have then paid our dues to God for the week? These Scriptures tell us that those who are worthy to enter the house of the Lord are those who deal with their neighbors, widows, orphans, and resident aliens with justice and compassion.

The answer, once again, is almost deafening: “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?”

In our current climate—with its nearly a total lack of humility—where so many live on the edge of economic poverty, and where the struggle just to live day-to-day (paycheck-to-paycheck) makes it almost impossible to find time for deeds of loving kindness and acts of justice on behalf of others, Micah’s prophecy might seem like one thing more than we can handle. But he challenges us again to see that the entry requirements to worship hinge entirely on how we live the *other* six days of the week.

Is it any wonder, then, that the Apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians that, to the rest of the world, the kind of sacrifice and compassion symbolized by the Cross looks like weakness and foolishness. He bemoans how many in the Corinth community of Christ have adopted the boastful—and even discriminatory—behaviors of the world around them, apparently feeling that their gifts of the Spirit have freed them from needing to be compassionate and just to one another, let alone to those beyond the worshipping community. Paul reminds them of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart” (Isaiah 29:14).

We would do well to note that Isaiah imagines this reform of God’s covenant people—a people who have become too self-reliant and self-impressed—is necessary “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote.” They honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.

Paul’s prescription for this same situation in Corinth echoes Micah’s call toward humility: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

This teaching brings us to the opening verses of The Sermon on the Mount, that portion we call the Beatitudes, or Blessings. Long thought to be aspirational for all Christians, on closer review, these Blessings appear to be more a statement of fact than aspiration, each beginning, “Blessed are...” Jesus lifts up those who are already peacemakers, already pure in heart, who already hungry and thirsty for righteousness, compassion, and justice, and already mourn for the conditions of this world that hold certain classes of people within systems of injustice and oppression. Meek does not mean “weak,” but rather patient, humble, teachable, trusting God, and showing gentleness in actions. Jesus recognizes that

the world is filled with those people who demonstrate for the rest of us what it means to do justice, perform deeds of loving kindness, and to walk humbly with our God!

Taken together, all four of today's lessons ask us to imagine that we can live lives that manifest the light, life, and love of Christ—*beyond* our Sunday mornings together.

Christ was born that we might be one in unity with the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God wants us to shine the light and life of Christ in all that we do and say, with and for others. Only then might we become true reflections of the God who is just, compassionate, and who—in all humility—became one of us.

May the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit help us all! Amen.

***Kirk Alan “Chief” Kubicek** was introduced to a life of eschatological hope and expectation having been born and raised a Chicago Cubs Fan in the western suburbs of Chicago, IL. After having served in a variety of parishes from Corporate to Family size over the past 40+ years, I am currently Priest in Charge at Christ Church, Rock Spring Parish, Forest Hill, in the diocese of Maryland, a small but mighty congregation. I believe the preaching task is akin to gathering the fuel and setting a spark that hopefully will create a fire of inspiration in the heart of those hearing the Word. In my spare time, I play drums in a Grateful Dead tribute band, On The Bus, playing in the D.C Metro and Northern Virginia neighborhoods. I take great comfort in the words of Saint Julian of Norwich: “All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.”*



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