

4 Epiphany, Yr. A  
January 29, 2017  
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

There are two essential questions being asked this morning, one in the Micah reading and one around the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel. In Micah, the question is What Does God Want From Us? And the underlying question in Matthew is, I think, What Does it Mean to Be Happy?

Let's look at Micah first. Not much is known about Micah except that he was a younger contemporary of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, that he was from the southern Kingdom and was probably a farmer. We come in this morning in the middle of a kind of law suit. God is bringing a case against his people Israel. God's inviting them to state their case. "What have I done to you?" he asks them. "How have I wearied you? I brought you out of slavery, I sent you leaders, you know of my saving acts." The next voice is those of Israel responding: "What's the problem? I've brought burnt offerings, (and then in a tone of exasperation and in a kind of escalating list) I've brought calves, isn't that enough? Shall I bring thousands of rams, or 10,000 rivers of oil? How about my firstborn?" All of these constitute the first question I began with: What in the world will satisfy this God? And we hear the final voice in the reading, that of the prophet saying quietly, "You already know; he's told you 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've heard this before - that true religion isn't about empty ritual but about transformed hearts, living in obedience to God.

You'll remember that Israel is the chosen people, chosen by God to be that kind of model community that exhibits God's plan for the whole world: a single human family in which all are cared for, loved and respected. Someone once said that Israel wasn't too happy about taking on this role, knowing what a huge burden it would be and that God had to threaten them by holding a mountain over their heads before they'd agree to be the chosen people. When we read the Hebrew Scriptures we hear over and over again about their failure, followed by their repentance. The failure this time is that both their prophets and their priests have been corrupted, telling the people only what they wanted to hear, telling them that "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world" even when that's clearly not the case. At one point Micah says that "If a liar and a deceiver comes and says 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer' he would be just the prophet for this people." So the prophets and priests are failing to speak the necessary critical words because the people refuse to hear them. Micah goes on to say that the political leadership of the country has also failed because they are exploiting the weak and dispossessed instead of caring for them.

So, in this courtroom setting, Micah reminds them of what they're about and it's pretty simple: doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Or I should say it sounds simple; someone suggested it would make a great bumper sticker. But it's clearly not simple to live out. Let's look first at justice. Biblical justice is not what we think of when we think of justice in our Western context. We think of justice as people getting what they deserve and we tend to think about it in terms of contracts or torts, or crime or litigation. We also think of it as impartial, symbolizing justice as a blindfolded woman holding scales. Biblical justice is far different.

Because the goal here is the health and well-being of the whole community, this notion of justice is concerned about relationships and about the community and its members not only surviving but thriving. Biblical justice has a distinct bias in favor of the poor and powerless and is about responding not to wrong-doing, but to need and it not only admits that bias but suggests that all justice has a bias, usually in favor of the powerful and that, if you took the blindfold off Lady Justice's eyes, you'd see someone with their thumb on the scale. This kind of justice is concerned again about building that egalitarian community in which everyone is loved and treated as a brother or sister. This kind of justice leads to peace and, conversely, without it, there is political and societal collapse. So JUSTICE – measured by how the most vulnerable in the society are doing. For this kind of justice, the question at each election wouldn't be are you better off than you were four years ago but would instead be, are the poor better off than they were four years ago. That's the first part of the answer about what God requires: that we DO this kind of justice.

And that's followed by loving kindness. Kindness like that exhibited by God for us – wanting nothing but our good. So this is love, not as emotion, but as expressed in deeds. Stephen Carter, an author and law professor at Yale tells about his family moving into a white neighborhood when he was 11. He recalls sitting on the front steps of the new house with his brothers and sisters wondering if they would be greeted. They were not. People looked at them but said nothing. Years later, he said, I knew we wouldn't be welcome there, I knew we wouldn't be liked; I knew we should never have moved there...and as he was thinking all this, a white woman coming home passed by on the other side of the street. She turned to the children and with a broad smile, said, "Welcome!" She disappeared into the house and came back shortly with a tray that was laden with drinks and cream cheese and jelly sandwiches. Carter wrote later that that moment changed his life. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends. (Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*) A simple act of loving kindness with a powerful message.

There's a second illustration of this, which is a story about Gandhi. It seems he was getting on a train one day just as it started to move and one of his shoes slipped off and fell on the tracks. Unable to retrieve it, he reached down and took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track to land close to the first. When someone asked why he had done that, he smiled and said, "The poor man who found the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use." With the eye of his imagination he pictured the disappointment of a man with bare feet finding only one shoe and joy upon finding the second. I guess you could call that an act of anticipatory kindness. Both of these stories seem to show simple actions but the compassion and vision of life from which they spring are not simple at all and are surely the result of transformed minds and hearts.

And finally, there's the admonition to walk humbly with God. That word "humility" needs some explanation I think because, at least to my mind, it carries a lot of baggage of breast-beating, and of self-denigration. Poor, worthless, little me, kind of thinking. I'd like to suggest that that's at the very least inadequate. True humility means to see what's going on with open and honest eyes. If you look at yourself that way you'll see both gifts and flaws. You'll also see someone that God loves in spite of everything. Then the prophet tells us to take that attitude with us and

walk with God. Of course, with God as your walking partner, humility isn't going to be a problem. I have told some of you the story of going on a retreat at St. John's in Collegeville and getting up very early one morning to go for a walk. While walking, I met a monk doing the same thing. I had thought to avoid him because I was sure he was deep in prayer, but it turned out he was more than happy to talk. He was very open and gracious and, at one point, asked me my opinion about the state of the church. Not having a clue who he was, I felt quite free to state my opinions. Later, I found out who he was – chair of their theology department, liaison to Rome, editor of their liturgical magazine, etc. After that, I was more circumspect in my opinions and found myself doing more listening than talking, which I think is the sense of what Micah is advising here. In this time of change and turmoil, perhaps these three admonitions can provide a solid basis on which our sense of vocation and direction can be deeply rooted.

We won't have time to get to the second question – about what it means to be happy – this morning. But next week's Gospel continues this Matthew reading, so I'd like to just leave you with some thoughts to carry forward. We've all heard the Beatitudes many times and commentators are still of different opinions as to whether they're high, impossible to reach ideals, or meant to be actually lived out. They are so counter-cultural, so upside-down, compared to the values of the world, that they seem quite impossible. I'd like to leave you with the world's beatitudes to think about until we can talk more next week.

So here are perhaps the more usual, conventional thoughts about what makes for happiness (which is the same word that in the beatitudes is translated as blessed)

Blessed are the rich, in things and in self-assurance

Blessed are those untouched by loss.

Blessed are the powerful.

Blessed are those who are "realistic" about righteousness, compromising at every turn.

Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.

Blessed are the crafty and the opportunistic.

Blessed are those bold enough to make war.

Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.

Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.

To be continued...