

“The Chicken or the Egg” The Rev. Keenan Kelsey Redwoods Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2017

Texts: Micah 6:1-8 Matthew 5:1-12

What a pleasure to be here again! I like this connection. But I confess, when I saw the assigned texts, I almost turned and fled....two very rich and important scripture passages in one day. Not only could each Beatitude merit a separate sermon, each of Micah's commandments could as well! Since we don't have time to explore each of these in depth, let's at least explore why they might have been paired, and what they might mean for us, for this time on this day.

Please pray with me. Open our ears, God, open our hearts. May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Amen

Imagine, if you will, this scene from my New York trip earlier this month. A tall, swarthy young man enters our subway car. His hair is slicked back, a tattoo of a cross on his neck topping a mountain of other body art. His black leather jacket zipped tight and his hands clenched. You could see the people shrink back just a speck, as he exuded danger. Two stops later he takes three graceful bounds toward the door, slicing easily through the crowd. Just before he exits, he stops before a thin, unkempt elderly man, huddled in a corner seat, shivering with a thin jacket. With one easy sweep the man takes off his leather gloves and deposits them in the old man's lap before disappearing onto the platform.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

Preacher Fred Craddock tells a story of a crowded bus depot café one cold morning, when the buses were all running late. As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth. Soon after, the door opened again. Someone yelled, "Close the door," A woman came in. She was middle-aged, had on a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. A big man with the greasy apron came over

"What'd ya want?" "Bring me a glass of water, please"

The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question. "What'd ya want?" "Just the water."

"Lady, you gotta order something." "Just the water."

The man's voice started rising: "Lady, I've got paying customers here waiting for a place, You order something or you get out!"

"Can I stay and get warm?" "Order or get out."

So, she got up. The people at the table where she was seated got up, people around got up, the folks that let Fred sit at the table got up, Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door. "OK," the big man with the greasy apron said, "She can stay." And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of soup.

Fred asked the man sitting next to him, "Who is she?"
"I never saw her before," he said, "but if she ain't welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

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And this, from yesterday: As a result of Donald Trump's executive order placing restrictions on travelers from Muslim-majority countries, passport holders from Arab countries, all with valid visas, were blocked from passing through customs, while others were prevented from boarding US-bound planes. In front of Terminal Four arrivals section at JFK International Airport in New York, hundreds of demonstrators chanted "No ban, no wall, sanctuary for all!" and "no hate, no fear, immigrants are welcome here!" Other protests were held at airports in Chicago, , Washington, DC, and right here at SFO..

Late yesterday, a federal Judge blocked these delays and deportations. Cheers arose as the detainees were welcomed into the country. Yes, the Executive Order remains in place, but this particular protest action was successful.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

These well-known and powerful words come from the prophet Micah. As Nancy explained, his prophesy sets up court, a legal tribunal. The judges are the mountains and the hills, God's very own creation. Those contending in this tribunal are God and human mortals.

The controversy is clear – God has not done anything to humans but free them and redeem them and save them and feed them. But the lessons learned from their time in the wilderness have been forgotten. The humans eventually capitulate, and admit their sin. But even then, they do not understand.

What is the fair compensation that mortals should render unto God? They ask. Are we to bring burnt offerings of yearling calves? Or maybe God would be happier with an offering of thousands of rams and ten thousands rivers of oil? Does it come down to the sacrifice of our children? Will that offering satisfy God?

Micah's answer is, of course, far simpler, and far more difficult: What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

We don't know a whole lot about Micah except that he was a prophet in the 8th century Before Christ, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. He spoke for the downtrodden and exploited people of Judean society, particularly for the poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of powerful landlords. Imagine him as an ancient version of Bernie Sanders calling for income equality and priestly accountability and fairness for all. In a period of turmoil and territory wars and change.

In addressing that eternal question, "What does God expect?" He describes call to live in active response to God's love, not a one-time sacrifice, but an on-going understanding of justice, kindness and humility. Do justice: "Justice is nothing other than love working out its problems" wrote Anthony Brown. Benjamin Disraeli said, "Justice is truth in action."

It is most certainly an action. Love kindness. This is also proposed as an action. Possibly because there is so much injustice in our world. God asks us to be kind. To be merciful. To be forgiving. One person said, "Kindness isn't really kindness until it costs you something." I don't know if there is a price tag attached to kindness, attached to mercy and compassion and forgiveness. But I believe that when we go out of our way in being kind to another, we usually bring out the best that is in them as well as in us.

Walk humbly with your God. I have to constantly remind my own self, there is a God and it is not me. Tom Sellack tells a story about some tourists in Hawaii coming toward him with a camera. He smiles and starts to pose, but the women said, Oh no, we want you to take a picture of us. God says, get over yourselves. You do not have to do big things, just righteous and kind things. The ego is not useful; pride and arrogance have no place here.

So --How do we do this? I can't answer that... each of us must answer for ourselves.

But I can point out that our scripture pairings give us a guideline to help make our decisions. If Micah calls us to action, the beatitudes --Be-attitudes -- are about who we are as the beloved of God. They are about "learning to live loved" as *The Shack* calls it - allowing God's grace to transform us. These statements are about "living as those blessed" even when the world dishes out miserable circumstances. They are about God breaking into the places where we are empty or hungry or struggling; they affirm vulnerability and authenticity rather than worldly values of power and pride; and they remind us of who we are, what qualities are blessed in God's sight.

Going back to the events of yesterday, Pope Francis made the connection between our two readings quite explicitly. In, condemning the hypocrisy from Christians who are merciless to refugees and people of other faiths, Francis rebuked "the contradiction of those who want to defend Christianity in the West, and, on the other hand, are against refugees and other religions." He stated; You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian," You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes.

On the face of it, these commandments make no sense at all. These are not the world's values! In sci-fi terms, the kin-dom is almost like a parallel universe right beside us if we only can recognize it. Or, in Celtic terms, it is that thin place where God and person are very close. There is no lasting value in material things or worldly awards or elevated status. There is reward in simplicity and faithfulness. They are a call to see things upside down and inside out. The Beatitudes ask for new understandings, and the life of Jesus makes these impossible things absolutely possible

There is something about the Beatitudes that plucks the strings of our souls, that rings a bell resident deep down inside all of us, the part of us that longs to live a blessed life and wonders how to do that.

The philosopher William James said, I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and am for those tiny, invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual through the crannies of the world, like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest moments of human pride.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ comes down to a rather simple proposition for ordinary people like you and like me. If God is to be known, that knowledge will be in the lives of the ordinary people who are redeemed by an extraordinary message of life. What the world knows of God, it will know through us. Does it start with the actions we take? Or does it start with our inner being, the way we are in relationship with God? That, of course, is the chicken and the egg question, right? Which comes first? And like that any koan, there is no right answer. It is both. And it is now. Whether you do the action and live into the being, or cultivate your relationship with God and let the actions flow from that, the work of God awaits our hands, the love of god awaits our hearts, and the people of God await our fellowship.

Therefore, each of you, let your light so shine in the world that all at see your good works, which cannot be good without the character and mantle of Jesus.