

## 2-1-16 Sermon: “The Blessed” – Micah 6:1-8 & Matthew 5:1-12

The lectionary – the cycle of assigned readings for each Sunday in the church year – can be something of a mixed bag. Sometimes the readings feel relevant; sometimes they feel obscure and far-fetched.

But every now and then, we get a Sunday like this one, where the Scripture readings just knock it out of the park. In fact, I would argue that in this morning’s Old Testament reading from Micah, we get the “crux” of the Old Testament, and in our Gospel reading from Matthew, we get the crux of the New Testament. It’s the Bible in a nutshell this morning. Take note, all ye who have ears.

The reading from Micah takes the form of an imaginary lawsuit between God and God’s people Israel. Micah calls the mountains, the hills, the foundations of the earth as witnesses to hear the grievance between God and God’s people, to determine who is in the wrong and what must be done to set things right.

God is the first to take the stand. God recounts God’s faithfulness to the covenant people: “I brought you out of Egypt, freed you from slavery. I led you through the wilderness and protected you from those who would do you harm. I carried you across the Jordan into the Promised Land, gave you a home and made you prosper. Now why, O Israel, can’t you be faithful and keep up your end of the covenant we made?”

Israel responds, and apparently they are pleading guilty because they have nothing to say in their defense. Instead, the people ask God, “What can we do to make things right? Should we make sacrifices in the temple – or give huge excessive offerings? Thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Should we sacrifice our own children to pay for our sins?” (Yikes, Israel – that escalated fast!)

The Prophet Micah returns in verse 8 with the verdict. It’s that famous verse, Micah 6:8, that we’ve heard a thousand times: “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.”

No punishment is exacted from the guilty party. God does not want our burnt offerings or our penance. And note, also, that what God asks of the people is not “religious” in nature – no Hail Marys or Our Fathers. The answer is not “show up to Bible Study” or “increase your pledge.”

No, the reparations God desires are simple: Do what is good, and you know what that is: Do justice. Love kindness, and mercy. Live in humble relationship with God.

It’s the heart of the Old Testament. It’s what God’s people are seeking for all 890 pages of the thing! How do God’s people hold up our end of God’s covenant? It’s simple, Micah says. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk Humbly. God will take care of the rest.

In the Gospel reading, we hear Jesus’ inaugural teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. The crowds have recognized that Jesus is a prophet, a teacher, a healer, so he goes up on a mountain to speak, and everyone gathers round to hear what he will say.

And so Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with a series of blessings for all the wrong people.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are hated, reviled, and persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

We’ve heard this list of beatitudes so many times before that we are liable to miss the shock factor, the gut punch, of these words. So let me state the obvious: No one in their right

mind – in Jesus’ time or in ours – would call these people blessed. The values Jesus articulates in this, the “preamble” to his greatest sermon, are completely out of line with the world’s values; it’s tantamount to standing up and saying, “Oh, how happy are the depressed!”

Jesus paints a sharp contrast between citizenship in the world as it is, and citizenship in the Kingdom of God, the world as God intends it to be. And he says, “If you want to find God in this mess of a world, go and find these of people: the poor. The despised. Those who make peace, seek justice, and show mercy. Those who mourn and those who live humbly on the earth.”

The beatitudes are both a blessing for those who are currently afflicted and unvalued by the world, and an admonition to those of us who are doing all right by the world’s standards. If we want to live in right relationship with God, if we want to be part of this Kingdom Christ is building, then we would do well to get close – physically *close* – to the people who are poor in spirit and persecuted for righteousness’ sake. To let them teach us how to be merciful, how to be peacemakers, how to be pure in heart. To let our worldly values be turned on their head and replaced with the values of God’s Kingdom.

Micah 6:8 and the Beatitudes. Summary statements for the Old and New Testaments. Did you notice they’re kind of saying the exact same thing?

Biblical scholars have asked, “Is there a guiding value or principle that connects all the groups named in the beatitudes? Is there something that all the people Jesus calls “blessed” share in common?

I would say it’s this: That all the people Jesus calls blessed – the meek, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit – understand their utter dependence on God and on one another.

The blessed recognize for themselves what is true for all of us: That our lives are dependent on God’s love and interdependent with the whole community of God’s creation. That we are not the self-sufficient, American bootstrappers that we pretend to be (bless our little hearts). And thanks be to God for that.

Because when we let go of our pride and our illusions of independence, we also set down all the pretensions and unrealistic expectations that go with them. We are set free to love God and our neighbors. To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

I wonder, sometimes, if the awareness and acknowledgement of our interdependence is the blessing itself...

In just a few moments, we will ordain and install a new class of elders and deacons – new members of the councils and committees that lead our church family.

Elders-and-Deacons-Elect, what that means is that I’m going to ask you an absurdly long list of questions, affirming that you are willing to serve and will do so faithfully. Some of the questions are poignant, others are pretty convoluted. But they all really boil down to the same thing: Will you carry out your ministry acknowledging your dependence on God and your interdependence with everyone else in this family of faith?

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Do these things, and you will be blessed. Perhaps not blessed as the world sees it, with wealth, health, and prosperity. But blessed by relationship with God and with one another.

And believe me, friends, that is much, much better. Amen.