



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 29, 2017
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

A Gospel Riff
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

Last week Alex Broomell, the son of our Secretarial Assistant, was in the office and I stopped to chat with him for a few minutes. Alex is enrolled at Nash Community College and the heavy-looking backpack he was toting indicated he is taking some serious classes. I inquired about his schedule and he mentioned English and Trigonometry classes as well as history and psychology, if I remember correctly. Then he told me that he was taking a music appreciation class. It was as if he had punched the buttons on a jukebox in my mind because a memory from college days began playing of a class Deborah and I took on music appreciation. It was a good class and I learned a lot, but I will never forget the "drop the needle" tests.

Every so often our professor would quiz us on the music we were studying. He would turn on the phonograph (this is ancient history, after all) and "drop the needle" somewhere on the record. After hearing a few measures of the music, we were supposed to know the name of the piece and its composer. Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony" with its repetitive pattern of four notes was easy, but it was about the only one that was!

I learned a lot about music that term, but if I could take a similar class now, I would want to learn more about jazz. One of the highlights of my concert-going is the opportunity I had to hear Ella Fitzgerald in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jazz can be thoughtful and reflective or impetuous and reactive. Jazz is soulful with roots in Gospel music as well as the Blues. I think what I like best about jazz is its use of improvisation. We are treated each week to the interpretations of sacred music which Mark offers us. His improvisations are a real gift to us. In the same way, jazz improvisations allow musicians to explore, expand, and interpret the music in their unique ways.

One of the fun aspects of jazz improvisation is the "riff." A riff occurs when a musician chooses a phrase or theme from the music being played and takes it where he or she wants to go. It is in a riff that we often experience the heart and soul of that musician.

As I began thinking about the scripture passages before us this morning, I noticed a relationship between the two texts. Micah spoke his words of prophesy about twenty-seven centuries ago, some seven to eight hundred years before Jesus was born. Yet his words and those of Jesus speak to the heart of a people's faith in a way that I find fascinating.

Micah, like his contemporary Amos, communicated God's feelings about social justice. The passage we just heard is fascinating because it is essentially a courtroom scene. God has filed a lawsuit against his people for ignoring him. "What have I done to you?" God asks. "What is wrong? I delivered you from slavery in Egypt. I sent Moses and Aaron and Miriam to teach you my ways. Over and over I have saved you, protected you, and guided you. Why are you rebellious toward me? Why are you ungrateful and faithless?"

After this scathing interrogation, the people speak: "What do you want from us, God? What is it that will appease you? Will burnt offerings do? We have tried yearling calves. What if we sacrificed thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Would that do it? Do you want our firstborn children as you required of the Egyptians, the ones on whom all of our hopes are placed? Would our children satisfy our debt to you?"

As the cries of their defense die down, Amos, playing the role of the judge, speaks solemnly: "God 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."

I imagine a hush falling over the courtroom as the truth of the verdict sinks in. Then someone begins whispering, "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God." A few more voices pick it up: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God." More and more people join in until the courtroom echos with the cadence: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God." It was the heartbeat of God's desire, the rhythm of God's love, the bass line of God's song: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God."

Through the centuries that followed, even though they did not always follow the line, that rhythm played in the minds and hearts of the Hebrew people. It was a steady rhythm—like the beating of a heart: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God."

Jesus knew that rhythm. He sang the words. Micah's melody became the baseline for everything Jesus said and did: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God."

Then one day Jesus found himself out in the countryside with a throng of people gathered around eager to listen. He began to teach. He sounded like a poet and spoke with passion. He seemed to reach into the minds and hearts of the people around him to pick out the words he spoke. He had compassion for them because he knew their lives firsthand and he knew what was ahead for them. He knew their dreams and hopes as well as their struggles and disappointments. He knew that they did not always have easy answers to life's problems and that many of them felt forgotten and neglected. They were trying to answer the question that their people had been asking forever: What does God want from us?

As he looked at the people—at his people—his heart stirred. He paused and he heard the melody. As if the rhythm was playing in his own chest, he heard it and felt it: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God." He took a deep breath and began to speak:

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called
children of God.
- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who
were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

One way to think about the passage we know as the Beatitudes is as if it were a Gospel riff on Micah's melody of faithful living. Matthew and Luke both tell the story, though with a decided difference. Matthew spiritualizes the teaching and focuses on our relationship with God while Luke takes a more

practical approach and reports Jesus speaking to real-life needs of people. For example, Matthew tells us that Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," thinking of his fellow Jews who were aware of their need to mature spiritually. Luke, however, has Jesus talking about the "sure-enough" poor, the folks on the low end of the economic scale. Both approaches are important. Both versions need to be heard because Jesus spoke to all people on that day and folks heard his words based on their greatest needs and concerns, just as you listen to this sermon today. Jesus began to speak and what he said that day reflected what Micah had said centuries before: "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God."

Professor George Hunsinger reminds us that the Beatitudes tell us a great deal about Jesus. They reveal the core of who Jesus was and is.¹ Since Jesus was God Incarnate, the passage tells us something about what is on God's heart. What is on God's heart, as Micah revealed, is "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God."

Dr. Hunsinger finds a pattern in the Beatitudes that groups the first four sayings as needs of the people and the second four sayings as resources of the Faithful. The final beatitude unifies them all in a reality all believers face. Following his pattern, with slight deviation, I hear Jesus riffing on Micah's melody as he sings the heart of the Gospel.

Jesus begins with a low, plaintive exploration of what it means to "do justice" which is to be just and fair with one another, to be right thinking and right acting in our relationships with one another. He looks around at the people before him and notices that some are poor, some are grieving, some are hungry, and some are beaten down, persecuted for their beliefs. He knows that their poverty is both physical and spiritual. He understands what it is like to mourn over sorrows like death or broken relationships as well as the loss of opportunities and the condition of the world. The look of hunger is obvious on the faces of people who have not eaten well in a long time and he recognizes a different hunger in the expressions of people whose passion is for a drastic change in life. He sees the despair in the eyes of those who have tried to do right but have been ridiculed and punished because of it. His words, like the sweet music of deep longing, wraps around them, offering understanding and comfort and hope.

¹George Hunsinger, "Introduction," *Reading the Bible from a Center in Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015) Kindle Edition.

"Blessed are you," he says. "How fortunate and happy you are because of the condition you are in for God's abundance and mercy are here for you. From the beginning, God created a world of abundance and generosity. That world has not gone away. It is here. It is for you. Happy and blessed are you!"

To do justice, Jesus knows, is to treat people well, with the dignity and respect deserved of the children of God. To do justice is to make available all of the goodness God has created in the world. In order to do justice, we must love kindness. Kindness, or mercy, empowers us to do justice.

Once again, Jesus looked over the crowd. He saw the children of God assembled before him, people endowed with unmeasured gifts and abilities. He began to point them out as his music rose to a higher key and the notes came faster.

"Blessed are the meek," he proclaimed, and people who had not lifted their eyes in years looked up. These were the people who were steadfast and confident, who knew their place in life and understood their calling. They had no need for attention or acclaim. Their gift was to share their encouragement with others and to lift the spirits around them.

"Blessed are you merciful," he announced, and pointed to people who were kind and understanding. They were the ones who noticed the needs of other people and acted to meet them.

"Blessed are the pure in heart," sang Jesus as he saw faces lifted up in pure joy. These were the people who saw life clearly and honestly, who acted out of truth without regard for personal gain or ambition. They were the ones who spoke truth and advocated for what is right.

"Blessed are you peacemakers," Jesus shouted, and people in the crowd reached out to grab the hands of people they did not know. They were the ones who blended reason and emotion into fair solutions.

Jesus looked out over the crowd full of people who needed justice and those who could provide it, people who longed for kindness and people who acted with mercy. He saw his people with needs and the gifts to meet those needs. He saw that they were one and he played his final riff.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The music brought everyone to their feet and they clapped in rhythm. Because they were people in need and people with the abilities and resources to meet those needs, they could do anything God called them to do. Jesus knew, however, what they all knew, that living faithfully is not easy. Not everyone will understand what you do or why you do it. Doing justice and loving mercy are not the order of the day, but it is what God wants of us. So hold your head up, know that God is with you and you are blessed in abundance. Walk humbly with God and your faith will reap its own rewards. People of faith have always struggled against evil. Prophets like Micah have stood up against the scourge of persecution and God has been with them. God will be with you.

The people knew they had heard the words before but they had never heard them in this way. "Do jus-tice, love mer-cy, walk hum-bly with-your-God." And Jesus said, "Blessed are you . . ." Indeed, blessed and happy are we! Hear the music! Amen.

January 29, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Although we say it often, we do not often believe it to be possible that we can be like you, O God. We know you best through Jesus Christ and his insight, his sensitivity, his generosity, and his righteous courage are far beyond what we think is capable. In our best moments, we would wish to be more like you, O God, but think it not possible.

Then you remind us that your grace is sufficient for our needs and your calling is to become more Christlike in every way. You lived among us as Jesus to show us how to live and you dwell with us now as the Spirit to help us live the life we have been given. We thank you God for your generosity and graciousness which are often beyond our imagining, but which we know now are not beyond our grasp. Bit by bit, help us to become the people you created us to be, we pray.

Help us to be gracious in word and action so that what we do and say will bring help and healing rather than pain and sorrow. Help us to live in truth so that we no longer hide in shadows and trade in deception. Help us to be holy, not falsely pious, but faithfully living out the gospel day by day. And help us to be enlivened with the power of your Spirit to live justly, kindly, and humbly.

Knowing that you do care for us each and all, we ask that you bring blessing to all who are ill, to those who grieve, to each one who is anxious and confused, to any who feel defeated, to everyone who has lost hope, and to all who face decisions that loom large. Bring to us the resources you have given to our world and guide us as we wisely choose the paths we follow. Make us aware of your presence, we pray, and lift our spirits to enjoy the wonder of your world.

Gracious God, we praise you for all of the blessings of life that are ours. Enable us to fully enjoy them and to generously share them with others. We offer our praise and thanksgiving now and forever. Amen.