



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, January 29, 2017

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Micah 6:1-8 | Psalm 15 | I Corinthians 1:18-31 | Matthew 5:1-12

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Is that the kind of life you want for yourself, for your children, for your nation? Is it what God wants for us, for the world? If it is how will we find it?

Throughout human history various well-intentioned systems, and religions, and even a few governments have sought to forge individuals and tribes into something greater than themselves, something outward looking, something comprehensive that stretches beyond the artificial boundaries of empires and nations. Their success or failure tends to ride on how well the people and their leaders handle the tension between self-interest and the greater good. There's nothing new about that. It's been that way from the beginning when Adam was caught red-handed in the Garden and tried to blame Eve for the fact that he had the scent of fresh apples on his breath. It's a good thing that God has a high tolerance for the effects of the free will God has given us. But it doesn't mean that God has given up on calling us to use that gift with wisdom and generosity. From time to time God reminds us of that call.

In his day, some 2700 years ago, the prophet Micah was one such voice. He saw his fellow people convinced of their own privileged righteousness, who enjoyed the benefits of a strong and prosperous nation, but who couldn't see the source of what is truly good, or how easily their lives could be turned upside down by not sharing what they had been given. Instead of growing into a relationship with God, they created a religion which put God largely out of the picture, confined to a dark room in an ornate temple. It was easier that way. Religions don't really require much of us, but relationships do.

Like all human beings, the Israelites of Micah's time had the capacity to understand rules and could follow their mechanics to the letter, or at least try. Their religion had become an exercise, like putting together a puzzle. As long as you have all the pieces and follow the instructions, you'll get it right every time. It didn't take much creativity, or imagination, or personal commitment, just obedience to the process.

Yet Micah, and anyone else who has struggled to figure out what God wants, can tell us that simple obedience to an instruction manual is not it. If that were the case, God would have given up on the human race long ago. For as we have seen, from the beginning, the one thing that we have not quite been able to do is follow the instructions. It's not that we can't, we just won't. Our pride, our fears, our ambitions tend to get in the way and then we rationalize it all by calling it 'independence,' or 'security,' or 'loyalty.' In an attempt to correct these isolating human flaws, religions, including Christianity, always run the risk of creating more rules, more instructions, more doctrines, than actually helping people live out the faith that a relationship with God offers.

In Micah's time that expressed itself in an obsession with a system of sacrifices and offerings that only served to exhaust people by demanding an adherence to a lifeless orthodoxy that did nothing to bring them closer to God. Their hands went through the motions, but their hearts weren't in it. No meaningful connection was made with the One they ritually worshipped. For generations, the rules had more or less been followed, but God rarely got the one thing God wanted – a people to be God's own children.

In our day, across the spectrum of religions, we can still see how a rich faith is often replaced with a narrow understanding of an infinite God. From that, hearts are either crushed by personal failure, turn cold, or are filled with arrogance in the effort to force burdensome requirements on others. Now before we relax into the smug assurance that we, as spiritually enlightened as we like to think we are, would never put a rule book in place of a living faith, let us not forget that God still requires something of us. Micah reminds us of that.

“Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” That doesn't sound so bad, in fact it's a very beautiful sentiment, like something that could be set to music. But don't think for a minute that it's any easier than following a long set of commandments. It's actually more challenging because it's not something anyone else can do for us – not our church, not our tribe, not our government. A life guided by justice, kindness and humility is a bold expression of individualism – of taking a stand for a set of values that runs counter to the “me-first” attitude that so often becomes the default set-

ting of human endeavors. That kind of commitment can only come from within, fueled by that divine spark that God has placed in each of us. An attempt to live by these principles will reveal that following a lengthy instruction manual, and checking off the boxes, takes far less effort. It requires nothing more than blind obedience which contradicts everything God wants from us.

Yet God's way requires its own obedience – the joyful obedience of individual hearts, and minds, and voices, and hands willing to use the gifts God has given us. What God expects is for us to use our imagination, our creativity, and our will to make a commitment to be God's instruments in the world.

Micah gives us a practical roadmap on how to begin to live out that life. Notice that of these three requirements, only one of them deals directly with God. The other two speak of our relationships with each other. The prophet is telling us that there's little use in trying to have a relationship with God until we first recognize the image of God in the people God puts in front of us every day. Our recognition of that and our response to our sisters and brothers we are called to serve will determine the depth and quality of our relationship with God.

If we fail to see God in our neighbor, no matter who or where that neighbor is, then we will make the same mistake the ancient Israelites made in going through the motions of religion, instead of engaging a faith that leads to a relationship with a living God. If we think we can love God without first loving all of God's children, then we still have a lot to learn about both.

We know what God wants for us: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk in humility. How will we find a way to do that? It's really not so hard, if we can come to see that this is exactly how God has been dealing with us all along.