



The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Matthew 5:1-12 Epiphany 4 2011
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Walk This Way

I have what may be some surprising news for some of you...and that is that the practice of religion very often just gets in God's way. And certainly our understanding of God's will as told through scripture is frequently misapprehended and distorted by a lot of well meaning religious types.

I know in my own life, very early on, I experienced a deep tension between what I heard and sang about Jesus from the Bible and in hymns with what the Church told me that Jesus demanded from good Christian folk.

This tension came to a head when I was twelve years old and two events combined that convinced me that Church alone did not always call out the best in people.

The first happened one hot summer morning as I was standing on my grandmother's porch. That day a very well meaning relative told me that Jesus would send me to hell if I did not stop wearing shorts and halter tops.

Now my Aunt Sarah was in the church every time the door opened and she was much older and wiser than I---and more important than that perhaps--- is that I loved my Aunt Sarah and her approval of me was important and so I tried very hard to listen to what she had to say.

But standing there on that porch, on that hot summer day, with her words beating hard up against my spirit and my deepest feelings about Jesus, I took my stand and made my choice. I told her as politely as I could that I just couldn't believe that Jesus cared that much about my clothes and I knew that he loved me no matter what I was wearing.

The second event came toward the early autumn of that same year when I was in the kitchen of our next door neighbor. It was a kitchen I was in quite frequently and it felt very much like home.

These neighbors, like my Aunt, wore their religion on their sleeves. And despite the fact that the older Parker kids reportedly looked liked hippies and our Dad was a confirmed agnostic, they seem to take all of that in stride and I was never made to feel uncomfortable that my family were essentially Godless heathens!

So on this particular day, I am in their kitchen when--- I will call her Gloria---came in from work and declared that she was just not comfortable working where she worked anymore---and I don't think I dare give the direct quote---but cleaned up it would have been "I am not comfortable working there anymore because there are just too many "black people"---only she used the "N" word instead of black people.

Now this was both a word and a viewpoint that I had long been taught was simply hateful and horrible. And hearing it come from Gloria's mouth was truly hurtful; hurtful because I knew even then that I would never really feel safe in her house again. And as I quickly left her home I wondered how could someone who went to Church so much say such a horrible thing?

So it was in that twelfth year that I decided that the Church and religious people might not know so much about God after all--- and I didn't attend Church regularly again until my early thirties.

I managed to stay firm in my belief that Christ's love surely couldn't be dissolved into a strict, silly dress code or that it just couldn't be okay to say you followed Christ and then speak with such hateful prejudice.

I became very suspicious of the Church because the people I knew who went seemed to talk the talk but they did not appear to walk the walk, as the old saying goes!

I continued to love and seek God, but I was convinced that the Church was just not where I would find and meet that love. I guess now the joke's on me!

Now, I share all of this with you today only because in a very real way it gets right to the heart of what has God is telling us through the prophet Micah:

"And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

You see walking is a favorite expression in the Old Testament for a relationship with God. We walk in God's ways. We walk by faith. We walk with God. Early Christians were often referred to as "Those Who Walk in the Way of Christ" or simply "The Way."

This way of walking with God calls for a deep fidelity between what we say we believe and how we then live into that belief with every part of our lives. Now I think where we get confused in all of this is that is often we think the only way to walk with God is to turn into perfect, holy people who are free from blemish.

Now, this might not be a news flash, but guess what? Such moral and religious perfection is utterly impossible to attain. No one, not even the most pure and righteous among us can attain to such perfection. So as a people who truly want to be good and faithful we seem to find safety in creating rigid rules and precepts that help us manage the pressure.

And the demand of having to be so perfectly righteous is such a strain that we default into simply following these rules. That is why time and time again, through prophets and sages, God has to remind us that simply “being religious” is not the end goal of a life of faith.

Micah asks if God is pleased with religion alone. God’s answer is “No!” This, by the way, is an ongoing theme in scripture—God actually has little interest in religion itself-- it is the content of a person’s heart that has always mattered to God then and now. And a faith community, the formation of which is something God deeply desires, is meant to reflect God’s unceasing forgiveness, compassion, and love.

In response to our belief in God, as “The Church” we are to do justice. In all our dealings, we are called to be fair, giving the justice to others that we want to receive. We are also, Micah says, to love kindness.

The word translated here as kindness is the Hebrew word *Chesed*. It is a word which is notoriously difficult to translate into a single word, but *Chesed* is a word that describes the love that God has for all people.

This God kind of love is not meant to be sentimental or romantic. It is instead a lifelong practice of learning to forgive as we have been forgiven; it is opening ourselves up to the notion that another’s pain, hunger, or oppression is our problem as well as theirs.

This love into which God calls us as “The Church” is a faithful love that will remain true even when we are confronted with our enemies or with people we fear through lack of understanding.

And on a personal level, *Chesed* is the sort of love that teaches me to forgive my Aunt and my neighbor--- trusting that even though they fell short, they were perhaps doing the best that they could.

And *Chesed* gives me the courage to look at myself and know that I often fall very short as well, but that God is always ready to give me a second, a third and a “trillionth” chance.

We see this love that God has for us *in the flesh* in the whole of Jesus' life. Jesus is the walking embodiment of God's love. In this sermon up on that mountainside he is not delivering yet another set of unattainable rules that God wants us to follow, but a description of who we become when we finally understand that we are all already beloved children of God.

When we cease striving to appease God and decide to simply walk with God instead, well then our whole lives are liberated and transformed.

Walking with God takes us on a lifelong journey with God alongside us at every turn in the path.

This is the key to understanding this passage from Micah and the key to letting these Beatitudes be words of deep encouragement instead of just one more set of impossible demands.

When Jesus says "blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake", we meant to hear words of extraordinary hopefulness.

Jesus is telling us, "Good people of St. Stephen's, this is the world that I desire for you. This is the world of people who believe. This is the world of people who put their trust in God's love for all.

This is the world as it already exists when you simply do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Amen.

**The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Seattle, WA**