

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X5
4 Epiphany (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 29 January 2017

Micah 6:1-8
Ps 15
1 Cor. 1:18-31
Mathew 5:1-12

The Newspaper and the Bible: Testing the Beatitudes

“What more does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6)?

Karl Barth (1886-1968), perhaps the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, taught that we should hold the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. He said that we should read the news through what we know about the Bible.¹ This is a two-part sermon and begins with this week’s news.

1. Brothers and sisters so much has happened since we last broke bread together. I hardly know where to start. Overnight it seems as if fear has become the primary organizing principle for our federal government.

Through a flurry of executive orders and official pronouncements we now have a clearer idea of what lies ahead. Our Muslim brothers and sisters have been especially targeted. Muslims from seven countries have been banned from entering the U.S. on visas for 120 days. Syrian refugees, a group of people currently suffering more than perhaps any other on the planet, have been banned indefinitely.² We seem to have forgotten both our nation’s tradition of welcoming immigrants and that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were refugees themselves.

This week journalists were arrested and charged with felony rioting. We have begun to worry that government scientists will be silenced for political reasons. The word “alternative facts” came into our popular vocabulary. The President continues to exaggerate the number of people at the inauguration and still insists that voter fraud was the reason he lost the popular vote. This raises a fear that voter suppression tactics could be in our future.

The Affordable Care Act is being dismantled endangering our poorest people. The Dakota Access Pipeline seems on its way to being revived. Clean water and healthy soil, other species and the earth itself seem to be at greater risk. We have put America first and turned our back on the global good. We are nullifying trade agreements and treaties. We are seeking to reduce funding to the United Nations and cutting foreign aid programs. The president publicly advocated torture and leaked documents suggest that we may be returning to an era of secret overseas torture facilities (“black sites”).³

The president has ordered the construction of a ten million dollar wall along the Mexican border and a brutal crackdown on immigrants.⁴ The administration has threatened to withhold federal funds from jurisdictions that do not cooperate. This includes San Francisco. We may soon know better from experience what it means to be “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Mt. 5).⁵

These days test the truth of the Beatitudes. In short, it is not a good week for the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, the merciful or the peacemakers. What I have

described are not the acts of a people who “love kindness” or “walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6). As a people we are acting out of fear and selfishness. A mean spiritedness has crept into our public life. We are scapegoating the weakest among us, those most in need of our courageous defense.

Some of you might share my sense of urgency. Let me be absolutely clear about my message to the whole world today. The message is: “you are not following Jesus if your heart is hardened against Muslims and immigrants or if you support torturing a fellow human being.”

2. But I have another message too and this is especially for you here today. It takes a little longer to articulate. The scriptures appointed for the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany have enormous importance for me personally. I preached my first Sunday sermon on this day. Since then I have preached on fourteen Fourth Sundays of Epiphany.⁶

For me the most important verse in the Bible is the one we just read from the Book of Micah. “What more does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6)? For homework you might even memorize this yourself. We named our firstborn son Micah to remind us to pattern our life on this ideal. You might notice that it is not about what you need to believe, but rather it is about the condition of your heart and how this shows forth in your life.

To his friends in Corinth Paul writes, “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1). This is a big promise, but also true in my experience.

This brings us to the Beatitudes. In this mountaintop scene Matthew subtly compares Jesus to Moses the lawgiver of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus repeats the word *makarioi* which we translate as blessed but also means honored or happy. It is a counterintuitive message. He says that the meek, the merciful, the poor in spirit, the very people who seem not to be blessed, really are blessed by God.

The question naturally arises whether this is a matter of what one ought to do or rather how the world is. I believe that the beatitudes are simply the way the world is. You should not try to be more mournful or poor in spirit. The point is that God is with people who are suffering, and with us when we are in pain.

Especially in these modern times we associate happiness with comforts, power, money and prestige. But the human spirit has deeper needs. We do not just want to be admired, we long to be good. It is not just about money, we yearn for our lives to have meaning. Jesus makes the point that there is a greater nobility in goodness, in living a life of compassion, fairness and honor. The satisfaction (the blessing, the happiness, the honor) that comes with this manner of life is hard for the world to recognize.⁷

You probably have a sense for most of us this already but there is more that we need to be reminded of right now. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) puts it into rhyme. “How small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or kings can cause or cure.”⁸ He means that government has an important role in our life, but it is not all of our life. Politics is not

the sum total of what makes your existence meaningful. It should not be our whole identity.

I think that part of how we arrived here as a people is related to this point. Right now we seem to have fairly close to full employment, a growing economy, working environmental regulations, low crime rates, increasing numbers of people with health coverage, even decreasing numbers of people who immigrated without papers and a remarkable safety from terrorism.

The rhetoric of offense, shame, injury, with all the talk of people who are ignored or victimized does not match the official government statistics about our collective health. This is because we have come to define who we are by our politics. It has become a false god, an idol for us, a distraction from the ways that we have come up short and need to change our own lives. Government is not supposed to supply the meaning of our life or solve all our problems.

In his 1972 novel *The Manticore* Canadian author Robertson Davies' (1913-1995) tells the story of David Staunton through transcripts of his Jungian analysis. Although initially David looked up to his well-to-do father, in his last conversation with a long admired Anglican priest he realizes that his father has been unfaithful to his mother and to love.

In the shock of this recognition David lashes out and calls the priest a fairy. The priest grows smaller, hesitates and responds saying, "[L]isten very carefully. I am a homosexual... I'm a priest, too. By efforts that have not been trivial I have worked for over twenty years to keep myself always in full realization of both facts and to put what I am and the direction in which my nature leads me at the service of my faith and its founder. People who have been wounded much worse than I, have been good fighters in that cause... it was my personal sacrifice of what I was to what I loved."

The priest goes on, "however fashionable despair may be about the world and people... not everybody or even most people, think and live fashionably; virtue and honour will not be banished from the world, however many popular moralists and panicky journalists say so. Sacrifice will not cease to be because psychiatrists have popularized the idea that there is often some concealed, self-serving element in it... Nor do I think love as a high condition of honour will be lost; it is a pattern in the spirit, and people long to make the pattern a reality in their own lives, whatever means it takes to do so."⁹

Offense and cynicism are barriers to the self-understanding which lies at the heart of becoming a better person. You may have a hard time getting the sense of it from such a short excerpt but there is a blessedness, a quality of the beatitudes in this priest's ordinary struggles and in yours too.

In conclusion, my message to the world is that followers of Jesus seek love and reconciliation among all people not just Americans. My message to you is to encourage you not to get derailed by politics. Cultivate your longing for goodness and continue to give your life to God.

So this is where my message to the world and my message to you converge. With all the lies that we have been hearing this week I want to point out one of the most serious.

People have been talking as if true religion is special loyalty to a group. This is not true. Real faith is humility, justice and kindness. It is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1). It is striving for an encounter with the Holy that will change your life.

“Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” “Blessed are you...” (Mt. 4).

¹ Tracy Dickerson, “The Bible in One Hand and the Newspaper in the Other,” 22 October 2010. <http://nacreouskingdom.blogspot.com/2010/10/bible-in-one-hand-and-newspaper-in.html>

² Michael D. Shear and Helene Cooper, “Trump Bars Refugees and Citizens of 7 Muslim Countries,” *The New York Times*, 27 January 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/politics/trump-syrian-refugees.html>

³ Reuters, “Trump May Reinstate Secret CIA ‘Black Site’ Prisons – US Officials Say,” 25 January 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/01/25/world/americas/25reuters-usa-trump-prisons.html>

⁴ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Orders Mexican Border Wall to Be Built and Plans to Block Syrian Refugees,” *The New York Times*, 25 January 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/refugees-immigrants-wall-trump.html>

⁵ Instead of building more wealth one cannot help but wonder if the federal government will just end up redistributing resources on the basis of political affiliation.

⁶ This includes nine lectionary Year A sermons.

⁷ In fact it might be mostly invisible to people and this itself causes suffering.

⁸ Matt Fitzgerald, “Columnist David Brooks: Chasing Beauty, Finding Grace,” *The Christian Century*, 1 February 2017, 27.

⁹ Robertson Davies, *The Manticore in The Deptford Trilogy* (NY: Penguin Books, 1990) 428-9.