

Micah 6:1-8

- ¹ Hear what the LORD says:
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
- ² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the LORD has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel.
- ³ “O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
- ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.
- ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”
- ⁶ “With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
- ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
- ⁸ 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?

Psalms 15

- ¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
- ² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
- ³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
- ⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
- ⁵ who do not lend money at interest,

and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Matthew 5:1-12

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Foolishness

January 29, 2017

Our readings for this Sunday couldn't be more appropriate in light of the last few months, and especially the last few days. There have been people in power and those who follow that power making decision about the future of our planet and the future of our country and the welfare of her people that have been nothing short of terrifying and confusing. We have seen protests both peaceful and otherwise and the world we live in right now is filled with anxiety for many. And just because you don't feel it doesn't mean it isn't happening to others. "Don't always believe what you hear", is a quote we've all heard in our lifetime, but a corollary that I heard is also quite profound and it goes, "Don't always believe what you think!" you may be wrong.

And if you came to church this morning looking for a loving gentle Jesus who never upsets anybody then you came to the wrong place because these scriptures, these prophetic and powerful words are ones that drove his ministry and gave him passion for the Kingdom, and he challenges us today and every day to think about that. Jesus turned over tables and threw people out of his Father's house in case you forgot that little episode! He stood in loving opposition to those in power and they crucified him for it. And he continues to call believers to stand for justice and kindness, mercy and grace, even if they too must face persecution, and at worst, crucifixion. And woe to the people who forget that because that's where we find ourselves both in our reading from Micah as well as this moment in 2017.

The Lord has a controversy with his people! Now it would be so easy to think that that is about some other people, but it isn't. It is about you and me and everyone who says they are a believer and follower of Jesus. And He will contend with us and with you individually. "What have I done to you?" says the Lord. "In what way have I wearied you? Didn't I bless you and guide you and lead you through life? I have told you what is good. I have written my word upon your heart. And still you treat each other as though you were all enemies.

You talk horribly about each other and accuse each other of wrong doing. You don't stand by your word and you take advantage of the poor and needy. You don't listen. You build walls and fences. You threaten war and don't work for peace. You take a lie and call it the truth. You demonize the foreigner and refugees and strangers. You prop up the rich and powerful. You side with politicians and call yourselves democrats or republicans and forget completely that you belong to me. You belong to me! And I claimed you in the waters of life and baptism. You have no humility and even if you offered me a thousand rivers of oil it wouldn't help because you have forgotten your calling. You have forgotten what this journey is all about. I told you what I require of you and that is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. So, what do you have to say for yourselves?" You Brood of Vipers!!!! (I had to throw a little John the Baptist in for good measure.) ☺

I've never read Jonathan Edwards sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, but I can well imagine that it might sound like a prophetic rant akin to Micah and the Psalm this morning. And for most of us we are guilty of not following God's calling to be humble and work for justice and kindness in the world. And as we mentioned last week, and Paul reminds us again this morning, one of the reasons we don't follow is because we prefer power to weakness. And the power of God seems to be foolishness to us as we look around and see that those who have power are the ones who are "Blessed" or who are enjoying life much more than some of us.

That God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor.) And I think Paul may have heard what Jesus meant when he heard the story we heard this morning, that those who are blessed and valued in the Kingdom world are not who you think they might be. And he challenges us to see again, to see anew, to humble ourselves and turn ourselves around. To consider that we

shouldn't believe 'everything we think', but to affirm our commitment to following Jesus, the Wisdom of God, revealed to us through scripture and the Holy Spirit.

This tension that we find ourselves in as we balance what it means to be patriotic, to be an American, to be either a republican or democrat, and a Christian, is one that Jesus and the biblical story constantly challenge us on. It is a tension that was just as prevalent in the day of those early believers as it is today. Rome and power have always been at the center of our lives, and culture too, has always held up to us to those who are powerful, attractive, and popular as being particularly blessed.

David Lose shared these thoughts in his comments this week where he said, "Every community has its own definition of what constitutes blessedness. We may not always use such a pious word, preferring instead to call it "the good life" or "success." But we all have definitions of what it means to have made it, and usually it's not those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek or pure in heart or thirst for righteousness and all the rest. In our world, when we think of someone who is blessed we most often think of someone who is wealthy or powerful or famous or successful or beautiful or enviable. Blessing, at least according to the standards of this world, is most often of the material kind. But Jesus teaches something different. Jesus teaches us to see how God calls blessed those who are down and out, distressed by their circumstances, passionate about promoting righteousness and working for peace, or persecuted for doing the right thing." (In the Meantime – David Lose – www.davidlose.net)

And Jesus is telling his disciples and you and I that those who are truly blessed are those in the crowd standing behind them and at the foot of the mountain who are suffering and empty hearted and hungry and poor. And it is these that God favors. And if you want to know that same blessedness you will need to go and stand with them and stand for them. To do just as the Lord demands which is to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Utter Foolishness! Really big foolishness. The biggest, foolishness ever.

James Martin, a Jesuit priest, describes doing an internship with a fellow Jesuit, Brother Bill. Brother Bill ministered to gang members, his "buddies," as he called them, and was known for his energy, enthusiasm and fearlessness. Martin shares what it was like the first time he accompanied Brother Bill to an impending fight between two rival gangs. The two men stand in the middle of the street, between the two groups.

"Now we pray," said Bill.

Martin continues, "We stood for a few uncomfortable minutes under the sunny sky, until the two groups drew closer to each other and began shouting epithets. Without warning, an empty soda bottle flew silently over our heads. ... Another bottle answered ... the shouting grew louder."

"But gradually the shouting died down and the two groups simply left. ... Brother Bill just smiled. 'We gave them an excuse not to fight,' he explained. 'With us here they don't lose face leaving the fight.'"

"That night I told the story at dinner. 'He's insane,' said one member of the dinner party."

"Perhaps. But Bill knew just what he was doing ... he'd walked into such situations dozens of times before ... his insanity probably saved many lives, the lives of his 'buddies.'"

"Peacemaking is dangerous business. Putting ourselves in a position to be called blessed takes courage. Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God might lead us to unexpected and hostile places. We will look like fools, but we will be called children of God. How can we not rejoice about that?"

Pastor Jill Duffield shared these wonderful thoughts in her posting on the Presbyterian Outlook website and I'll close with this today. She goes on to say, "We can't participate in the blessing if we refuse to engage with the ones Jesus calls blessed.

This list, like the Ten Commandments, is prescriptive, not just descriptive. Jesus moves from "those" and "the" to "you" in verse 11. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Why will we be reviled and persecuted? When we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. All kinds of evil show up when we proclaim Christ crucified and live the Jesus life of hungering for righteousness.

The Beatitudes are no Hallmark movie script; it is the centerpiece of Jesus' instructions for disciples. The Beatitudes aren't only about what God has and will do, they are a clear directive of who followers of Jesus Christ are to be: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the ravenous for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted. Sounds like foolishness, doesn't it?

And yet, to those who believe, it is the greatest cause for rejoicing imaginable. It is a life of blessedness, belonging and freedom. A life lived not for self alone, but for the sake of the One who came to save us. Foolishness? Yes, but what more could we want than to be fools for Christ?" (Jill Duffield, Editor of The Presbyterian Outlook, Looking into the Lectionary – January 29, 2017.)

So, welcome to this family of fools for Christ. I pray that you will have courage to follow in the way of justice, and kindness, walking humbly not only with God but with all God's children. Seeking wisdom from the One who leads the way and not from princes or rulers of this kingdom. And may you be truly called blessed as you serve the least of these my sisters and brothers. Amen.

This morning at Newdale we will install new elders. I'm going to think of them as "New Fools for Christ" in light of our reading today, and I'm going to invite them to come down now and join me at the front as we affirm their willingness and commitment to be disciples of Jesus and who walk humbly with God.