

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

First Reading

Micah 6:1–8

Hear what the LORD says:
Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the LORD has an indictment against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I wearied you? Answer me!
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.
O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

“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?
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?”
He has told you, O man, 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? (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

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

Where 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? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 5:1–12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

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

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

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

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

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

“Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Micah’s active ministry coincided with that of Isaiah and Hosea. (He was active roughly from 735-700 B.C.) His concerns were similar to theirs, the faithlessness of Judah and its injustices. His written work was well enough known that Jeremiah quotes him. (Jeremiah 26:18)

Micah’s prophecies fall into three “cycles” of judgment, punishment and restoration, 1:2-2:13, chapters 3-5, and chapters 6-7.

Our reading for IV Epiphany comes from the third of these cycles and comprises the indictment against Judah and Jerusalem. The promise of punishment follows, along with a lament over the destruction of Judah and the promise that Zion will, after this, be lifted to glories higher than she has yet known under a Davidic king.

As I read these verses, though, I don’t hear the voice of a prosecutor in a courtroom, I hear the plea of an exhausted parent. “What have I done that you treat me, and one another, this way?” God goes on to recall the way that They led them out of slavery and conquered the kings that lay before the people so that they might find a place of rest. “What have I done?” still echoes behind all this.

Then we hear the people’s response. “How do I make this right? How shall I come before the Lord? With bulls, with calves, with burnt offerings?” And the answer we hear is:

He has told you, O man, 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?

Just a quick image from this response. It is the mountains speaking. God appeals to the mountains as judge in this case. The people ask the third party what to do. God doesn’t say, “I have told you, O man, what is good.” The mountains reply, “*HE* has told you, O man, what is good.”

And the words that follow are probably the most well-known of any from the prophet Micah. “Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

It all sounds so simple, but when I started looking into them they’re packed with more layers of meaning than I could have imagined. And anyone living in Judah at the time would have heard all those layers in ways that we do not.

“Do justice.” The word translated justice here, *mispat*, is translated more often than not in the Hebrew Scriptures as “rules.” When Moses gave God’s “rules” he gave God’s “justice.” Here “justice” carries the weight of all the rules that God has given the Hebrew peoples. But it’s also translated “rights” in a few places. So it also speaks to the sense that we have that persons are entitled (by God) to certain things. “Doing justice” is a weighty thing.

Then we have “love mercy.” The word translated “mercy” here is the Hebrew word “*hesed*.” Many of you reading this will know that word. If you’ve studied the Hebrew Scriptures much you know that this word is frequently used to describe an attribute of God, God’s loving-kindness, God’s mercy, God’s steadfast love. But, and this surprised me no end, it is also translated “disgrace.” (Leviticus 20:17) I was astonished to find that, but I’ll get to that later.

While I was doing these word studies I found a verse in Deuteronomy that also linked the words translated “justice” and “kindness” in our reading. It is this: “And because you listen to these **rules** and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the **steadfast love** that he swore to your fathers. (Deuteronomy 7:12, ESV)

This confirms to me that when Micah said “love kindness” he meant “love God’s kindness.” Yes, that results in us being just and kind to one another, but the focus here in Micah is on God’s justice, God’s rules, and the steadfast love toward God’s people that accompanies that faithfulness. As I read this passage against the background of the reforms of King Hezekiah, during which this prophecy was likely given, I am reminded that in Hezekiah’s reclamation and cleansing of the Temple many, many animals were sacrificed. And when Hezekiah called all of the distant peoples together to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem they came together from as far away as Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, and the Feast was extended to seven days, and 1000 bulls were offered, and 7000 sheep. That changes how I hear,

“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?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"

It seems to me that Micah is critical of some of the reforms under Hezekiah, those that are not accompanied by "justice." By keeping to the "rules."

All this isn't to say that God can't be calling us to a simpler, kinder life through these words. I'm just not sure any more that this is what Micah envisioned when he gave them.

I said I'd come back to that instance of *hesed* in Leviticus, where it's translated "disgrace." I make no pretense to being a Hebrew scholar, so take this with a handful of salt, but this is so challenging I have to take a stab at it. How is mercy a disgrace? When we ask it that way, it begins to open possibilities. To extend mercy is to forgive, to relinquish a right to retribution. It is to humble, to disgrace oneself for the sake of relationship. So, yes, I can see how mercy can be a "disgrace." As I gaze upon Jesus, hanging from the Cross, mercy and disgrace do seem to merge.

Make of that what you will!

Second Reading

Foolishness that makes foolish the wisdom of the wise. We begin our reading this week with the last verse from our reading from 3 Epiphany A. I still haven't figured out why they tagged that on to a discussion of divisions.

But Paul here is concerned with an unhealthy elevation of the place of "wisdom" in the Corinthian congregation. He starts off by making reference to Isaiah.

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

Here's the passage to which he refers, with a little extra thrown in for context.

Isaiah 29:13–14

And the Lord said:

"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,

while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,
therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,
with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.” (ESV)

“Wisdom” is clearly a problem for the Corinthians. The term “wisdom” (*sophia*) appears more times in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians than in all the rest of Paul's epistles combined; and, of the twenty times the term “wise” (*sophos*) occurs in the New Testament, sixteen occur in Pauline writings; of those sixteen, ten of them occur in 1 Corinthians 1-3.” (From Carl Holladay's book on 1 Corinthians, I can't do proper footnotes in Wordpress so I won't try.)

Paul goes on to say that it is Christ crucified that is the foolishness he preaches. “A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” (And this seems to hearken back to the intersection of “mercy” and “disgrace” I suggested above?)

I think that it's informative to set Paul's refusal to engage in “the wisdom of the wise” in context. When Paul first arrived in Corinth he had just left Athens. In Athens he preached at the Areopagus, and while he gained a couple of followers there, he founded no church in Athens. It was, by Paul's standards, a miserable failure. And he relied on human wisdom to make his arguments for Christ. Here's the text of that sermon from Acts.

Acts 17:22–34

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,
“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (ESV)

So when he came to Corinth he had resolved only to “know Christ” among them “and Him crucified.” No more fancy speech. Not that he was ignorant of such rhetorical forms. Indeed, he employs them in his letters. But he did not want (again?) to empty the Cross of its power.

I’m reminded of the books I read in seminary (not many, thankfully) that were collections of great sermons by great preachers. I’m reminded of the time in my early career I spent “crafting” a good sermon. And I cringe when I read Paul again. I don’t mean that there’s no place for good writing in the church, only that a sermon is an event, an encounter with Jesus, with God, not a document, and if it’s not about “Christ crucified” and how that manifests in our lives and in the world, it may only be “wisdom.” And wisdom doesn’t preach. It may inform, but it doesn’t preach. (I so desperately wanted to write “*It don’t preach*” but I’m only putting it in these parentheses.)

I think there’s a lot of teaching to be done in the church. Formation, catechesis, whatever you’d like to call it, the church needs it, needs a lot of it. But I don’t believe that teaching without first preaching gets us anywhere. The world needs the Cross of Christ. That’s the why. The how then follows.

Gospel Text

In our reading from Matthew this week Jesus begins what is frequently known as “The Sermon on the Mount” that includes chapters five through seven. Matthew has organized the teachings of Jesus into five major sections. This is significant. So are many of the details about the beginning of this, the first section.

Because Matthew is writing for a largely (if not exclusively) Jewish-Christian congregation, he wants to emphasize certain things about Jesus. In chapter five, Matthew's emphasis is "Jesus is the prophet like Moses that Moses himself said would come." "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—" (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV) This is probably why Jesus' teachings are organized into five sections, to parallel the five "Books of Moses," the first five books of the Bible. It is also why Matthew included certain details about this teaching. When he wanted to teach them he "went up on a mountain." This evokes the images of Moses going up Mount Sinai. And he begins to teach by giving the Beatitudes. Some scholars have likened this to the giving of the Ten Commandments. And when He teaches, Jesus sits down to teach. This was the posture of a teacher, a teacher of the law. The teacher sat, the disciples stood. (How different from today!)

The more time we spend in Matthew this year, the more we'll see how thoroughly he sees Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish expectations. He'll push his congregation's understanding of their own expectations to new places, but he'll always ground the Gospel in its Jewish roots.

I haven't written anything this week about the Beatitudes themselves, in part because I wanted to focus on the Jewishness of them as Matthew presents them. I did, however, write another piece on the Beatitudes you might like to read that turns them rather inside out. It was written about Luke's version, but the ideas in it still hold for me. [HERE's A LINK](#) to that reflection.