

4 Epiphany Yr A, 30/01/2011
Mic 6:8; I Cor 1:18-31; Matt 5:1-12
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“Practicing Faith”

Did you ever try to stand on your head and walk with your hands? When I was a boy, I tried both—however, I was not successful for very long. Yet, one of the things that I was aware of while in that upside down position was how everyone and everything looked different. If you are like me, you are much more comfortable standing right side up and walking with your feet.

In our first and second lessons and today's gospel, the world is presented in an upside down way. However, for people of faith, this upside down world is really God's right side up world. As people of faith we all need to practice our faith. If we are able to stand on our heads and walk with our hands, we need to practice. And while we are in that position, we will not feel as comfortable as when we are right side up. The same is true of our faith. We need to be practicing our faith to grow and mature in it. As we live out our faith we will feel uncomfortable and so will others around us. Why? because what seems to be upside down by worldly standards is, in God's eyes, right side up.

The upside down world of Micah 6:8 is really God's right side up world. The prophet tells us that what is required for true worship of God is practicing our faith. In this verse, Micah summarizes brilliantly the best of Israelite prophetic tradition. He says what the LORD requires for true worship and practicing faith is: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

When we think of justice, we can see it as a negative thing if it favours others whom we do not believe deserve it—or if it is only

window-dressing and hypocritical, without any real changes for the better. For example, Canadian singer-songwriter, Bruce Cockburn, in a profound line in one of his older songs describes justice in the negative way: “Everybody loves to see justice done on somebody else.” In other words, we do not want to be on the receiving end of justice if it has a negative effect on us; if we have to give something up or change and the giving up or change does not benefit us.

However, there is a positive side to justice—especially if we benefit from it or we can see that it benefits most of the people, most of the time. For example, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr thought that you cannot have a democratic society without justice. He said: “[Humanity’s] capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but [humanity’s] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” From a faith point-of-view, going back to Martin Luther, he thought that the function of the authorities of the state were called by God to preserve justice in the world—i.e. to make sure that the strongest and most powerful in society protected and respected the interests of society’s weakest and least powerful.

Micah’s exhortation “to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” has parallels with today’s second lesson and gospel. Thinking about how we love kindness and walk humbly; I am reminded of the old 1987 movie, *The Princess Bride*. *The Princess Bride* begins at the home of Buttercup (played by Robin Wright), the future princess bride. Her small, crude house sits on a hill, with beautiful sloping countryside as a backdrop.

Though dressed in drab brown clothes and clearly a peasant girl, Buttercup orders others around as though she were royalty. Another peasant named Westley (played by Cary Elwes) is a labourer on Buttercup’s farm, and the narrator says that Buttercup’s greatest pleasure in life is tormenting Westley. She refers to him as “farm boy” and makes liberal use of her authority as she orders him about.

Yet no matter how menial the task, Westley always responds the same way: "As you wish."

"Farm boy," Buttercup says, "polish my horse's saddle."

"As you wish."

"Farm boy," she says as she drops two pails at his feet, "fill this with water."

"As you wish."

"Farm boy, fetch me that pitcher."

"As you wish."

Though Buttercup is maddeningly condescending, Westley is the model servant. He never refuses her demands, and his attitude is kind and willing.

The narrator reveals that one day Buttercup has a precious insight. [The narrator says], "That day she was amazed to discover that when he was saying 'As you wish,' what he meant was 'I love you.'"¹

Such a story reminds me of Paul's words in our second lesson as he compares and contrasts worldly wisdom and God's wisdom, worldly strength and God's strength. He tells us that Christ crucified is God's wisdom and strength, even though in the eyes of the world it is foolishness and weakness. According to Paul, God's foolishness in Christ crucified is wiser than worldly wisdom; God's weakness in Christ crucified is stronger than worldly strength. Such divine wisdom and strength, says Paul, is able to save us, and through it we know that he loves us.

The story also reminds us of the gospel beatitudes of Jesus: the poor in spirit who know their need of God's grace and forgiveness are in the kingdom of heaven. Those who mourn will be comforted. The meek will inherit the earth. Unlikely, unassuming folks, yet such as these love kindness and walk humbly with God.

According to Jesus' beatitudes, the truly blessed and happy folks are filled with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. They are the

merciful and will receive mercy—which reminds me of another story. In the story, there is a sense of the close connection and interrelationship between mercy and justice properly administered:

(The following story, possibly apocryphal, is) about New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia (1933-1945). At one time during the Depression, he was serving as a night-court judge when a woman appeared before him who had stolen food to feed her children. Desiring to satisfy the demands of both justice and mercy, La Guardia told the woman, “I fine you ten dollars for stealing, and I fine everyone else in this courtroom, myself included, fifty cents each for living in a city where a woman is forced to steal to feed her children.” The money was immediately collected, the fine paid, and the extra money given to the woman.² The story, I believe, underscores the importance of doing justice and showing mercy for the purpose of addressing the root causes of injustice and working to change them.

Jesus goes on to give a blessing and happiness to the pure in heart who are single minded; along with the peacemakers. The pure in heart are single minded in the sense that they do not get side-tracked from what is most important—to put it in the language of Jesus elsewhere, the pure in heart do not strain gnats and swallow camels. Or in contemporary language—they do not become distracted by too many irons in the fire; and mountains are not made out of molehills. They have the ability to focus on priorities and stick with them no matter what. This could also be said of peacemakers who are tenaciously committed to peace—the health and well-being of others and of God’s whole creation. Peacemakers are folks who can live in harmony with others; they are team players; co-operators; and consensus-builders; they are able to transform enemies into friends and neighbours; and work for win-win situations with integrity.

Jesus ends his beatitudes with the promised blessing and happiness of the persecuted and reviled; those who are falsely accused on

account of their loyalty to Jesus. He tells us that such folks are to rejoice and be glad since their reward is great in heaven. From earliest times, beginning with Stephen, there have been Christian martyrs put to death for their faithfulness to Christ. Like Stephen, other martyrs have uttered words of forgiveness to those who put them to death. Today, according to one statistic, about 160,000 Christians a year are persecuted for their faith. They are wrongfully arrested, sometimes not given a proper trial, tortured, sexually abused, burned and executed for their loyalty to Christ. Yet, Jesus says such folks are to rejoice and be glad—something I think very difficult to do under such circumstances. Yet, the following words of one martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer are inspiring and instructive:

Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them they will not despise us and persecute us. They certainly will.

But not even that can hurt us or overcome us, so long as we pray for them. For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them.

Every insult they utter only serves to bind us more closely to God and them. Their persecution of us only serves to bring them nearer to reconciliation with God and to further the triumphs of love.

It is only when one sees the anger and wrath of God hanging like grim realities over the head of one's enemies that one can know something of what it means to love them and forgive them. Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis during World War II.³

In all of what our texts teach us today, I believe the most important message is that practicing our faith is about relationships—our relationship with God, with one another, and with God's world. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, may we be inspired by these words to keep practicing our faith in response to God's love for us. In

practicing our faith, we continue to grow and mature in our relationship with our Lord, one another and his world. Amen.

1 Cited from: Craig Brian Larson & Lori Quicke, *More Movie-Based Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching: 101 Clips to Show or Tell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan & Christianity Today International, 2004), pp. 182-183.

2 Cited from: Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom: Ethical, Spiritual, and Historical Lessons from the Great Works and Thinkers* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1994), p. 399.

3 Cited from: D. C. Talk & The Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Albury Publishing, 1999), p. 159.