

January 29, 2017
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Annual Meeting Sunday
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:8: “[The LORD] 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?”¹

Please be seated.

When asked to name my favorite verse in the Bible, I always say Micah 6:8. It's not *exactly* my favorite, because the word *favorite* implies something much simpler than what I actually feel. Micah 6:8 found me, and it keeps coming back, with a resonance that never fades.

Do justice; love kindness; walk humbly with God. I distinctly remember my first encounter with these words. It was in December 1999. I had recently moved to rural Danville, Vermont. I had been attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation outside Seattle, the congregation whose non-Christianity had rescued me from nearly 20 years of being unchurched. After the move to Vermont, the nearest UU congregation was a tough winter drive away in Montpelier, so I resolved to try the church nearest my home. Rather predictably, it turned out to be United Church of Christ, a denomination about which I knew nothing. Concerned especially about its view on homosexuality, I steeled myself for what would be the first time as an adult I “voluntarily” attended Christian worship.

As you might guess, I needn't have been so concerned. That first Sunday, I wept through most of the service. Afterwards, as I was filing out, on the wall next to the back door of the sanctuary, I saw a cloth banner with the words, “Do justice; love kindness; walk humbly with God.” I had never heard them before. It was one of those life-changing moments that almost freeze in time. I got a sudden and mysterious glimpse of a Christianity very different from the one I had previously known. Instead of a toxic combination of shame and fear, I saw wonder and possibility; instead of rulebooks and scorekeepers, I saw elegant simplicity: Do justice; love kindness; walk humbly with God.

Danville UCC turned out to be just what I needed, at least for a while. A couple of years later I moved to Burlington, Vermont, and found the Episcopal Church, my true church home. Even so, when asked about my call to ordained ministry, I usually mention Micah 6:8. A couple of months ago I decided to write its triadic summary on my office wall in large Celtic lettering. Though unfinished, the template for that project is taped up in my office. I recently quoted Micah 6:8 to open my Parish Enews article, without knowing that it would make its triennial lectionary appearance today. Yes, Micah 6:8 keeps coming back.

Ironically, its appearance in the lectionary didn't save me from having a devil of a time preparing this sermon. I don't think I'm alone in saying that these are tough times for preachers, and the news just keeps getting more troubling. In the two weeks since I last preached, I've gotten enough sermon fodder for the rest of the year, and the fodder dispenser seems unlikely to slow down. The result is a giant vat of gooey porridge. Unlike *Oliver Twist*, I don't want anymore. Where does one dip one's spoon into a vat of porridge that large? How can one even begin to digest it all? The size and weight of it makes me feel Lilliputian by comparison.

Some would say that if I was a better Christian, meaning a different kind of Christian, I could trade that vat of indigestible porridge for a treasure chest full of gold. That would seem to be the message of the leaders of the Prosperity Gospel, of which the new President is a proponent. I mentioned the Prosperity Gospel in a sermon a couple of years ago, and hardly anyone in the congregation had heard of it. I'm pretty sure that's different now, thanks to the inauguration appearance of Prosperity superstar Paula White, the primary spiritual advisor to the President.

Most Christians, even Evangelicals, consider Prosperity theology heretical; in an article last week, a prominent mainline Protestant pastor termed it "idolatrous."² This matters not to White's followers, for whom her opulent lifestyle is not excessive, but rather proof that the Prosperity Gospel *works*. I wish I had checked out her website *before* stewardship season. At the bottom of every page is a button labeled "Partner with Paula White," next to a photograph of the contents of the "Monthly Partner Box" that one's financial commitment will earn. That box is just the tip of the iceberg: send your donation to Paula White Ministries, and God will shower you, too, with much-deserved material wealth. Forget the porridge; you will eat caviar at every meal.

That pretty picture lies in harsh contrast to the ugly flip side of the Prosperity coin. If a person is poor or sick, it's their own fault. They would be fine if they had more faith in the Prosperity Gospel; it's impossible if they're not even Christian. It's an unconscionable case of blaming the victim. If a believes it, it's probably a lot easier for him to sign an executive order barring entry to refugees from Iraq and Syria; if someone believes that, it might even be fun to play chicken over the Affordable Care Act. Justice? Kindness? Humility? These are the stupid habits of pathetic losers.

Justice and kindness begin with humility, and that's a complicated subject for our culture. This week there was a great article in the *New York Times* about our culture's current use of the word *humility*. As the author bitingly puts it, "In the present-day vernacular, people are most humbled by the things that make them look *good*. They are humbled by the sublimity of their own achievements. The 'humblebrag—a boast couched in a self-deprecating comment—has migrated from subtext to text, leaving self-awareness passed out in the bathroom behind the potted plant."³ This is a far cry from the more traditional Christian understanding of humility as lowliness or as modestly appropriate self-worth.

Humility is not humiliation, even though some powerful people who report feeling humbled are willing to humiliate others. That's not what Micah 6:8 is about. True humility means giving credit where it is due, by quietly recognizing one's own sacrifices and accomplishments, while acknowledging that any success depends on more than oneself. Humility is not about setting oneself apart, but about building togetherness. It upholds others through the recognition of what all people share in common: our vulnerability to the random roll of the dice that life so often seems to be; our deep need to love and be loved; the emptyhanded nakedness with which we enter and leave the world. The only result of true humility is justice and kindness, and that's how we *should* be following Jesus.

Our annual meeting will take place after worship today. One of the things one does during an annual meeting Sunday sermon is offer a sort of "state of the state" message to parishioners. So, here it is: fourteen months into my time here, from my perspective and I hope from yours, St. Thomas's is doing remarkably well. We have made progress across the board, including in the two major areas I was contracted to address: financial stability and especially Day School relationships. A lot of people have done a lot of hard work, and it is already paying off. I'll leave the details for you to read in the printed report.

At last year's annual meeting, one exercise involved breaking into nine table groups, with each group discussing one of nine ministry areas. I read through the conversation notes again last week, and was relieved to find that we have had progress toward many of the hopes you shared. At today's annual meeting, we're going to try something completely different, with a focus on social justice. This is not to dismiss the other ministries. Instead, it's a recognition that the energy at St. Thomas's for social justice has skyrocketed in recent weeks. Practically the entire congregation attended one of the marches or rallies last weekend. This past Friday, a bunch of us turned up on short notice for the immigration rally at City Hall.

Popular theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote this: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴ Right now, what seems to lie at the intersection of our communal "you" and the world seems to be in the area of social justice. Because everything we do as a congregation is entangled with everything else, this terrific new social justice energy may provide the propellant we need to launch us into the vital future that most congregations can only dream of.

After the flurry of news stories yesterday, I was tempted to rant to you about the executive order regarding the entry of refugees and immigrants from Syria and several other predominantly Muslim countries. It needs to be said, but I'm pretty sure that here such a rant would be, as they say, preaching to the choir. We all know that Judeo-Christian values are clear on the imperative to welcome the alien and protect the weak. A rant would serve mainly to make me feel better, so I did that in my head at home.

Here, instead, let's try to put our collective rant energy to good use. This congregation already possesses a treasure chest, one overflowing with gold representing the blessing of incredible potential. So let's talk about a different sort of "prosperity" gospel, one that the Jesus of the Beatitudes might appreciate. The Beatitudes we heard in today's Gospel follow Matthew's usual pattern of a flipping of the social order. Despite the tenets of the Prosperity Gospel, he wasn't just kidding. When it comes to salvation in the Kingdom of God, we're all in this together. *Our* Prosperity Gospel urges us to recognize the wealth and power and privilege that together we already possess as a community of faith, and to spend our treasure on behalf of those who are less fortunate. To make the most impact, we need to explore the gifts we have and how we might partner with, and for the benefit of, the larger communities of which we are a part. Therefore, during our annual meeting, we're going to do a condensed version of a process called "asset mapping." Asset mapping is a community development tool that helps a group of people understand its strengths and resources. The eventual goal is partnering with other groups to address needs of the whole.

You'll learn more shortly. There are surely a lot of needs right now. Early in this sermon I mentioned a giant vat full of gooey porridge-y sermon fodder and my spoon seeming feeling Lilliputian in comparison. Let's close by remember something important, something that yields a very different image: working together, *those* Lilliputians *stopped* Gulliver's travels. And the Lilliputians of St. Thomas's are on the move.

Notes

¹ Micah 6:8, NRSV.

² Stanley Hauerwas, "Christians, Don't be Fooled: Trump Has Deep Religious Convictions," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2017, available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/27/christians-dont-be-fooled-trump-has-deep-religious-convictions/?utm_term=.5d923ec87fa4 (accessed January 28, 2017).

³Carina, Chocano, "Calling Yourself 'Humble' Doesn't Sound as Humble as it Used To," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2017, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/magazine/calling-yourself-humbled-doesnt-sound-as-humble-as-it-used-to.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=mini-moth®ion=top-stories-below&WT.nav=top-stories-below> (accessed January 28, 2017).

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, as quoted on *Goodreads* online, available at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/140448-the-place-god-calls-you-to-is-the-place-where> (accessed January 28, 2017).