

October 15, 2023

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Day School Sunday

Micah 6:6-8
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 25:31-40

Good morning! If you are joining us from St. Thomas's Day School this morning for the first time, we want to extend a special welcome. Thank you for coming to visit us today.

Day School Sunday is the day when we invite the St. Thomas's Day School community to join us for Sunday worship. The Day School was founded over 60 years ago as a nursery school, and over the years has grown to a renowned pre-K through 6th grade school. Day School Sunday was an established annual tradition before COVID, and we are happy to be reviving it and bringing it back this year.

I want to quote a line from the Day School's website, which stuck with me as I was preparing this message. "Every morning at St. Thomas's, [these words] are spoken in Morning Gathering: 'Make this a better world, and let it begin with me.' We believe this affirmation . . . empowers students to be change agents in our world."

These words aptly sum up the readings for today. "Make this a better world, and let it begin with me." That is the work that God calls each of us to do.

In the times of the Prophet Micah, a lot of tradition and ritual had been created around the practice of religion, just as it also has today. As part of their practice of worship, the people of Israel and Judah would go to the Temple, bringing offerings of animals – calves and rams – and oil. And yet, according to Micah, in the process of fulfilling these traditions, they had forgotten what was truly important.

"Shall I come before God with calves a year old? With the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" Today, in our church, we might read this passage this way: "Shall I come before God with candles and robes? Will the Lord be pleased with organs and stained glass windows and cathedrals?" The point is not that these things are bad! Clearly, there is a reason we do all of this every Sunday morning. But these things are *not enough*. If all we are doing is coming to church on Sunday and lighting candles and singing songs, and then we go home at 11:30 to live our lives in exactly the same way that we were before, we are missing the point. The words of Micah remind us that true worship of God is not found in all of these things, but in doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. God calls each of us to help "make this a better world."

What exactly does that look like? Well, Jesus offers us some insight into that in the reading from Matthew. Shortly before he is to face the cross, Jesus is telling his followers to prepare for the time when he will come again, and he tells them that one day, they will stand in front of God and account for their lives. It sounds a little scary, maybe, but it turns out not to be so bad. At that

time, he says, God will tell them that they are blessed, because when God was hungry, they fed God; when God was thirsty they gave God water; when God was a stranger they welcomed God in and clothed God.

The people, in what is actually a pretty funny passage of the Bible, respond: “God, with all due respect, what the heck are you talking about? You’re God! You don’t get hungry or thirsty or cold. You don’t even wear clothes! We have never, not even once, done any of the things that you are giving us credit for.”

And God answers: “Whenever you did these things for the least of these people of mine, you also did it to me.” “Make this a better world, and let it begin with me.”

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus was asked by someone, “What is the greatest commandment?” And he answers that the first commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and the second commandment is just like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All of God’s teachings are summed up in these two commandments. These two commandments are not separate things. No, what you do for the least of these, you do for God. The way you treat your neighbor is the way that you are treating God. Love God, love your neighbor. Those are the same thing.

God doesn’t say: “You will inherit the kingdom because you came to church every week and you prayed a lot and you read your Bible.” Those aren’t, as I said earlier, bad things. If you are doing those things, I am certainly not going to tell you to stop! But importantly, those things are not enough. Again, if that is all we are doing – that’s a problem.

But if you are taking care of the needy and afflicted, the hungry, the wanderers, the ill, the prisoners, the people whom our society has left behind and forgotten – then that’s enough.

Exactly what that looks like is likely to look different in each of our lives. Here at St. Thomas’s we support Loaves and Fishes, and are currently collecting donations of clothing for the winter months. If you feel called to participate in that, there’s more information in the announcements section of the bulletin. Other members here support the work of IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services. Some of us will be supporting their Run for Refugees fundraiser in the coming winter. You may be doing something different in your own personal lives. As we learn from the Day School affirmation, it begins with each one of us.

At the end of every Episcopal service, we close with Words of Dismissal. You can see these words on page 12 of your service bulletin. There are a few options in our Prayer Book for the form that these words can take; the simplest one, which we use for Morning Prayer, is “Let us bless the Lord.” Another version of the dismissal that is sometimes used is this: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” The purpose of the Dismissal is to remind us that the work of God does not end here on Sunday morning, with prayer and Eucharist. Instead, we are charged to take the work of God out into the world – each one of us acting as God’s agents of change in our daily lives.

A friend and mentor of mine, whenever he had the opportunity to say these words at the close of the service, was fond of replacing that line instead with: “Go in peace to love and serve the

poor.” There’s a theological truth for us: to love and serve the poor is to love and serve the Lord. It’s one and the same. What you do for the least of these, you do for God. Amen.

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