

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

Requirement or Blessing
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Mary R. Brownlow

If that ancient saying, “familiarity breeds contempt” is true, we should be feeling contemptuous of our scripture readings today. The Beatitudes, the series of blessings in the Gospel of Matthew, are often memorized, and many Christians can at least paraphrase them. And we sing a verse from the Micah reading every Sunday here. Frequent repetition, the lull of those familiar words, can send us into a zone where we don’t actually listen anymore. Not contempt maybe, but contentment and complacency. So an opportunity to preach on these passages is an opportunity to zoom in a little closer and take a look, to hear the words all over again, as if for the first time.

The writer John Dalrymple compared the human spiritual journey with God to the swing of a pendulum. We swing with inward movement to closeness to God, and then the counter movement outward to meet the needs of the world. If the pendulum swings only slightly inward, it can swing only slightly outward. The closer we draw to God, the further we can go in redemptive engagement with the world. At times we may lose momentum entirely, and be subject to distractions and delusions.

It’s an interesting metaphor because we can apply it to so many stories from Scripture. The Hebrew people were called to draw close to the God of their ancestors, so that they could follow in Abraham’s footsteps, the one who was told, “... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” As the history of those people unfolds, we see obedience and disobedience, prosperity and disaster, intermingled with conversations with their God, through the medium of prophets. As the history of those people unfolds, we see the constancy of God’s love, which they called *hesed* (and we sometimes call mercy or kindness), a love that would not ever let go: a pull on the pendulum, like gravity, dependable as a law of nature.

So we have one of those brief conversations, courtesy of the prophet Micah, today. This one is set in a cosmic courtroom, because “the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.” The witnesses or the jury are the mountains and hills, the foundations of the earth. In good rhetorical style, God begins, “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” and then goes on to list the ways that divine *hesed*, steadfast love, has saved the people over and over again. The defense, the people of Israel, respond with a strange mixture of abject humility and bravado: “OK, how big a sacrifice does God want, how many animals on the altar, how many gallons of holy oil, what do we have to give up?” In other words, “What do we have to do to gain your favor, your love, your approval?”

Micah makes it clear that these people have missed the boat, missed the point. God’s actions in the past show that God already loves them beyond measure. They don’t have to earn this. The wording we usually hear and that we sing every Sunday may be a bit misleading here. We sing: “What does the Lord require of you?” and we may think what does the Lord “demand” or “insist on” as in the requirements for a college course, for which we will be graded. The actual Hebrew

word has more nuance: it is more like seeking for or yearning for longing for. God longs for us to do justice, and love *hesed*, and walk humbly and closely in God's loving presence.

And while we're at it let's look at the familiar words: justice, mercy, humble. *Mishpat* justice is not just courtroom justice, rewarding good and punishing evil. It is working to make sure that everyone is cared for and has what they need. A just society builds a richer and deeper community where everyone matters and is engaged in mutual care. And we are asked to love *Hesed* love – a strange, almost inexpressible phrase. To me that means reflexively embodying the kind of love God has for the people, reflecting enduring faithfulness out to the world, as the pendulum swings that way. And we are to walk humbly with God. We wrestle with the concepts of humility and meekness, often seeing them as based in shame and low self-esteem. But here I see walking humbly as walking with trust, listening carefully, a sort of day in, day out reliance on God. Walking humbly is not one heroic moment, it is a million small moments of leaning in to God's loving Spirit.

Through Micah's voice, we hear about God's yearning, which manifests itself as blessing and gift. Compassion and empathy are gifts, gifts that allow us to look out on the world and clearly see injustice, to feel another's pain as our own. It is a gift that bears fruit as we are moved to take action, allowing God's *hesed* love to shine out in our work for justice and peace. All that is "required" is to receive what is eternally and lovingly offered.

In the same way, Jesus' 9 blessings in the Gospel of Matthew are both an invitation into relationship and an acknowledgement that the relationship already exists. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and he begins, not with instructions, not with stories of obedience or disobedience, but with these beatitudes. So it is not about earning or deserving, or "if you do all this, then...". The disciples (and we) are blessed with God's favor from the very beginning. The disciples (and we) are chosen while still poor in spirit, still feeling the need of grace, still hungry and thirsty for justice and mercy. God often chooses unlikely people, through whom the Good News shines even more clearly. Sort of like that pendulum swing again, drawing us in from the edges, sending us out again to the edges.

The theologian and pastor Henri Nouwen wrote, "When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to other their own chosenness.... Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God's eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God's heart." And so Jesus begins with claiming all those who are completely bereft and without honor or position in the eyes of their society for the Kingdom of Heaven. He does this for all to hear, on that mountain by the lake. Not only are they claimed, they are given gifts: they have worth, and they have a community. They are delivered from victimhood into blessedness. He gives them freedom from despair, grief, oppression and injustice in order to act with healing, integrity, peace and faithfulness. Like the people of Micah's time, they only have to claim the gift that is freely offered: the gift of God's yearning love.

When Jesus says "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," we hear how we may be blessed by reflecting God's longing for integrity and wholeness in human living and in all creation. We are blessed by divine yearning and called to embody it. Just as Abraham was called to the cost and joy of being a blessing to all the nations of the earth, just as the people of Micah's time were called into a daily trusting walk, just as Jesus' disciples were called into a loving, inclusive community, we are called.

It is natural and understandable, when people of faith gather, to consider what God wants of us. How do frail, fallible mortals have a relationship with divine glory? As we ponder this, as we open ourselves to this mystery, the pendulum begins to swing towards God. What do we find? Requirements or blessings? If we are really open, if we listen carefully with the heart, we may find that divine *hesed*, the unearned and unending compassion of God, waiting to form us, reform us, and send us out in a trajectory of justice and mercy. And we may find the blessed Other, waiting to share in our joy. May this be so for all of us. May we find the Kingdom of Heaven in each other's company. Amen.