A Path before Our Feet

4 Epiphany

January 29, 2017

[Micah 6:1-8](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi4_RCL.html#ot1) [Psalm 15](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi4_RCL.html#ps1)

[1 Corinthians 1:18-31](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi4_RCL.html#nt1) [Matthew 5:1-12](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi4_RCL.html#gsp1)

what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

These words from the prophet Micah are some of the most famous—and most important—in the Bible.

I like the rather free translation in The Message:

But God’s already made it plain how to live, what to do,
    what God is looking for in men and women.
It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,
    be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don’t take yourself too seriously—
    take God seriously.

1. Do what is fair and just to your neighbor.
2. Be compassionate and loyal in your love.
3. And don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.

I think that the more direct translation of the New Revised Standard Version has more oomph: DO JUSTICE.

*DO* JUSTICE

*Do* justice. *Practice* justice. *Enact* justice. *March* for justice.

My most fervent hope and prayer for St. Paul’s this year is that we become even more fully—ever more fully—a church that stands for justice. Gospel justice. For the poor, for the migrant and refugee, for the homeless, the trafficked, the persecuted and hated, for those without health care, for all those whom our government and our society mostly ignore.

As we say in our baptismal vows:

Will you seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

*People* I will, with God’s help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being?

*People* I will, with God’s help.

These are core Gospel values, central Christian values.

I’m often afraid, though, that these promises—and Micah’s plea—are more honored in the breach than in the observance.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But today I want to add one very important—extremely important—topic to Micah’s list: spirituality.

Spirituality.

To paraphrase Thomas Merton: Doing justice without a well-grounded and deep spiritual life is just doing busywork.

It’s like giving your dog a bath without first removing the dead critters from the field: as soon as you’ve finished the dog’s bath, he’s going to roll in the stench. You first have to cleanse the yard before you bathe the dog.

Rather than try to define spirituality, *a* spirituality, or hurl any more wild and crazy metaphors at you, let me tell you about just a few of my days at the end of the previous week. My hope is that these stories will offer if not a searchlight at least a tiny phone flashlight for the path before our feet.

 I visited a woman, Marianne. Marianne isn’t a parishioner, but she is. She’s an Episcopalian. She was active in the Episcopal church in Salinas for forty-one years. Marianne has moved to Bakersfield—to die. To die with her family. She has congestive heart failure, and will not live much longer. Her children, her family, are all Baptist. But Holy Communion is, at least right now, at the center of her being. Barb and I take Communion to her twice a week.

Marianne’s condition—and her spirituality, her life in consecrated bread and wine, have moved me more deeply than I have words to express.

 I visited the father of a parishioner; he lay dying in ICU. I prayed for him and with those present. I anointed him with holy oil for his imminent journey to God. He died that evening. When you walk into such a situation, you have no idea of the family dynamics, of the family’s joys and sorrows, love and hatreds. Silent familial relationships seem to submerge the room, my soul and being, in familial longitudes and latitudes, warfare, truces and, one hopes, at least at the end, peace.

 I visited in the ER the father of another parishioner. He had kidney failure. I prayed for him and with those present. I anointed him with holy oil for healing, whatever incarnation that healing would take.

The son later texted that after surgery the next day his father had recovered 99% of his kidney function. The doctor called it a miracle. What exactly happened? I’m honest enough to say: How the hell should I know?

But I believe—and I’m not completely sure about this, but I believe—that what happened later is not as important as what happened in that room imbued with the Holy Spirit.

This belief may surprise you, even shock you, but I feel it deeply, as though each cell of my body were a tiny rivulet bearing the Spirit to my heart, mind, soul, and spirit.

I think the same Spirit later whispered to me so I wouldn’t get all syrupy and soppy about this; she said: “Tim, your thoughts are beautiful, and moving. But now imagine me sluicing my way down these rivulets that have become streams. And I’m yahooing and hollering as I ride through your spiritual veins and arteries on my favorite surfboard.”

 And then I went on retreat.

The retreat was sponsored by Integrity, the Episcopal organization for LGBT folks and their friends and allies.

Friday night and Saturday morning at ECCO near Oakhurst it snowed—and snowed, and snowed. The winter wonderland we now dwelled in turned out later that morning to be prophet and priestess to the startling white and sacred stories that some of the retreatants shared.

In ten years of ministry at Grace and St. Paul’s I had heard, sadly over and over, the stories of suffering and redemption spoken by our LGBT sisters and brothers. But that Saturday morning I hadn’t heard *these* stories.

Once again, as we affirm in our baptismal vow: to respect the dignity of *every* human being. The holy reality of each of *these* human beings.

What made each of the stories that Saturday morning sacred was the dignity, the holiness, the now-repairing brokenness of each one of these children of God. As I listened to stories of rejection and hatred, by family and self, stories of trauma and resurrection, my heart broke—over and over and over.

I thought—no, I felt—the wrack and ruin that so-called disciples of Christ have wreaked upon our gay sisters and brothers; the whippings, lynchings, and cross-burnings that we—we, the people—have inflicted, and still inflict, on our African-American brothers and sisters. I thought of—no, I felt, ever more deeply—the wounds that our opponents bring, the throat-throttling sorrow caused by denigrators and haters, now sprung from their cages.

I’m not a crier. But I am a water-er. My eyes water when I’m moved. In that retreat room, with my sisters and brothers, as my eyes watered I renewed with each story, each person, my baptismal vows to love, honor, and respect—and fight for—each and every one of them.

Each and every one of *you*, gay, trans, straight, or whatever rainbow color in-between.

And then, as if God had opened only one floodgate, and one floodgate had not been enough, we broke into small groups. Our group had four of us, all from St. Paul’s, two gay, two straight. And the truth-telling and tears started anew.

I will never forget, even as awful as my memory can be, those four or five days of pastoring and retreat.

There are desert stories from the early days of Christian monasticism of monks who had a ministry of tears. Some monks cried so deeply and so continuously onto their naked chests that, it is said, the waters slowly created crevasses and canyons in their flesh.

Whether these monks dwell in history or sacred storytelling doesn’t matter. What matters is that they can both illustrate and model for us a ministry of caregiving, a ministry of empathy and compassion, love and justice.

I hope, for myself and for you, that my words have shone a light on a spiritual path. One path, not the one and only path. But a path founded on the Torah, the prophets, the Gospels—and, of course, Jesus.

I see Jesus up ahead, quietly and prayerfully shoveling dirt to the side, creating, crafting, and landscaping a path, a way, for each one of us, each and every one of us, singly or together, alone and in community.

This community.

Amen.

1. *Hamlet* I.iv. But as “Mangled Shakespeare” notes: “Hamlet means that it is more honorable to breach, or violate, the custom of carousing than to observe it. So the phrase is properly applied to a bad custom or rule that should be ignored. Instead, we and others frequently use it in almost the opposite sense, referring to a good custom that, unfortunately, is often breached.” <https://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/mangled-shakespeare/?_r=0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)