

Epiphany 4A (2/2/2020)

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Justice and mercy are the fruit of faithfulness to God. If God has filled our cups to overflowing, then they naturally overflow to others. But justice and mercy, though compatible, are distinct, and the reign of God rests on both.

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

There once was an old church in a small town tucked away in the mountains along the banks of a mighty river. Out of a deep love for God, the townspeople came to church week after week to sing their praises and offer their prayers and share the Lord's Supper. One Sunday, a young woman gazing out a window in the sanctuary caught a glimpse of someone struggling in the river, swept along by the strong current. She stood up in her pew and shouted, and the congregation rushed out to rescue the stranger, pulling him in by a rope tied to a fishing boat. “Thank you, thank you,” he gasped, as the townspeople stood along the riverbank, shaken.

The next week, another stranger appeared in the river, this time a mother with her young child. Leaping into action again, the townspeople pulled the little family from the water and offered them fresh clothes and something warm to drink. Murmurs spread from one person to another as they wondered whether the two incidents might somehow be related.

The weeks that followed left no doubt, as a steady flow of desperate people came floating down the river, crying for help over the roar of the current. As more and more of them crawled out of the rushing water, cold and exhausted, the townspeople realized

they'd need a plan if they were to continue to save people from drowning. The president of the congregation called a meeting to divide the responsibilities. Someone offered to organize volunteer rescuers, someone else started a collection of clothing and blankets, someone else stocked food in his pantry. Everyone agreed to help in one way or another, to serve according to the example they had in Christ.

At the close of the meeting, the young woman who first saw the man in the river through the church window stood and said, "I'm glad for the commitment our community has made to help these people. But, shouldn't we try to find out where they're coming from in the first place?" Silence settled over the room for a moment, then the townspeople agreed.

The next day, a small contingent set out, following the river upstream to discover the reason for the recent crisis. Eventually, they came upon a bridge over the water, the only one for miles, and just beneath it, a strange sight. Carrying their belongings over their heads, a family waded deeper and deeper into the river, step by unsteady step. Running to stop them, one of the townspeople called out, "You, there! The river is dangerous. Why don't you cross the bridge?"

"We would," the mother shouted back, "but we can't afford the toll."

"The toll? But the toll is only five."

Hurrying up the embankment to the road above, the townspeople approached the bridgekeeper and asked, "Why are you letting people try to cross the river on their own? Why don't you encourage them to cross the bridge?"

"They're free to cross the bridge," he replied, "if they pay the toll."

"And, why don't they? The toll is only five."

“The toll is now twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five?” the townspeople gasped. “Who can afford twenty-five?”

“If they can’t afford it,” the bridgekeeper said, smiling, “then they’re free to cross the river elsewhere.”

Stunned, the townspeople retreated, and as the sunlight was beginning to fade, they set up camp some distance into the woods. Around the fire that night, they conceived a plan.

The next morning they returned to the bridge and confronted the bridgekeeper. “We have spent the last several weeks rescuing people from the river in our small town, and now we understand why. We demand that you lower the toll again to five. And, if you don’t, we’ll build a bridge of our own.”

The bridgekeeper looked at them hesitantly. “Ten,” he said.

“Five,” they insisted.

Frustrated, yet not wanting to compete with another crossing, the bridgekeeper conceded.

The little band returned home and delivered the good news to their neighbors. And in the weeks and months that followed, no one drifted down the river in need of rescue. Still, the townspeople began to raise funds to build a bridge, should the need for it someday arise.¹

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

¹ “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.” – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

I'm sure I'm not the only one who treasures our first reading from the prophet Micah as a summary of the life of faith. It was my favorite scripture growing up, and still counts among those I love best.

Of course, Micah's famous prophecy is not a command that we're to obey in order to win ourselves a place in God's good graces. After all, justice and mercy are attributes of God in the first place. God is fundamentally just, liberating the enslaved, defending the vulnerable, restoring the outcast. And, God is exceedingly merciful, meeting need with abundance, mending the broken, welcoming the wayward. **To do justice and love mercy is simply to be fed, and thus to desire that all others be fed, too; it is to live into God's kingdom on Earth as it already is in heaven.**

But, the church has all too often missed the difference between justice and mercy, favoring the latter and neglecting the former. Mercy is always possible, no matter the present circumstances. The well of need will always be deep enough for us to fill. But, justice requires that present circumstances be examined and, if necessary, overturned. And as such, justice carries a risk. "When I feed the poor," Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Brazil famously said, "they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Dear church, justice and mercy are the fruit of faithfulness to God. **If God has filled our cups to overflowing, then they naturally overflow to others. But justice and mercy, though compatible, are distinct, and the reign of God rests on both.**