

What it takes

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 29, 2017.

...do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

In its day, Capernaum was a thriving place. Located along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, it was a prosperous and bustling town with everything needed to make it an ideal place in which to live. The fishing was excellent. Peter, Andrew, James and John made their living as fishermen. On the hill overlooking the town, there is a natural amphitheater where thousands came to hear Jesus give a series of meditations that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. The first portion of this series is known as the beatitudes that are a list of blessings that lead to happiness. They are essentially chapter headings for meditations on particular topics. Each is a sermon in itself.

When Jesus speaks to the gathered crowd, he sits down in the tradition of Jewish teachers. In contrast to the warnings of the prophets who came before him, Jesus emphasizes hope and possibility. He teaches us the true meaning of what it means to be blessed and in favor with God. Happiness is not found in social status or in how successful we may be in worldly achievements. Instead, Jesus teaches that true contentment comes with acknowledging our spiritual poverty. It is found in knowing what we lack in our spiritual life and in taking the first steps toward reaching the heart of God. It is found in those who offer comfort and solace when we mourn the loss of a loved one. As peacemakers, we work not only for the absence of conflict but also for the true peace that comes with reconciliation. The essential point is that the kingdom of God is found within.

We are all born with the gift of free will. We are free to choose between right and wrong. We are also free to turn from living only for ourselves to focus on others. We have the choice to adopt shallow values or to aspire to what is right and good and true. We all begin life in a personal Garden of Eden marked by innocence and grace. After we learned to discern the difference between right and wrong, at some point we willfully chose what we knew was wrong. That is when we stepped out of that spiritual garden, that state of innocence never to return. Until we learn to accept responsibility for ourselves, we are destined to wander in ambiguity until we find our moral compass that guides us in the right path. We never grow up until we stop blaming others and learn to accept responsibility for ourselves.

At the heart of the Christian faith is to know what it means to love and be loved. Otherwise, nothing else makes sense. The healthiest relationship is one in which there are no ulterior motives, no manipulation and no attempts at domination. Instead, we put our energies into encouraging the best in each other and become channels of God's grace by putting our gifts and talents to good use. The more we give the more we gain.

More important than what life has dealt us is what we do with what we have. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote that we tend to blame things on our circumstances. He said that the people who get on in this world are those who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them. (Mrs. Warren's Profession, Act III, 1893) That is the essential difference between living passively and being proactive in taking charge of our life.

When we take our life in Christ seriously everything is turned around. Those who think they should be first are last while those who have been ignored are first. Those who claim high priority are brought low and those who humble themselves are lifted up. Those who assume places of honor have to move down.

The prophet Micah tells us that if we want to know what God expects of us, we center on the basics: to promote justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8) This means correcting injustices and inequalities that hinder the quality of life for all. By practicing the qualities of humility and mercy we work for reconciliation and peace. If we find ourselves used as a scapegoat for the faults and mistakes of others, that is their problem, not ours. If we strike back at those who hurt us, we gain nothing.

If being a Christian in today's world is seen as foolish, Saint Paul wrote that God chose what is foolish to shame the wise. God chose the weak to shame the strong. (I Corinthians 1:27-28) What others see as weak, God sees as strong. Those who try to make others look foolish only succeed in revealing their own insecurity. Deep down inside a bully is a very unhappy person. There is no use in worrying about what others think. If people are displeased with us, the only one we really need to please is God.

At our Annual Parish Meeting today, we are focusing on building and strengthening our parish life. We have good leadership in our Vestry and a mission driven budget. We must always stay focused on our mission. At the heart of who we are and what we do is to follow the essentials in Micah's command: To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.