

## February 2, 2014 Communion

*Both readings today are exceptional for their brevity. They make a clear and indisputable connection between our worship lives and our social conduct. They form the foundation of what we understand ethics to be in today's world. Is the message getting out there?*

### **Micah 6: 6-8**

*This passage dates from the late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. It is set up as a court case with God as the Judge, Israel as the defendant and all of nature as the jury. The crime is worship that is showing but lacking in substance. The faith of the people has not impacted their relationships outside the Temple. They have acted as though showing up for worship gives them a free pass to mistreat their neighbours the rest of the week. Listen to this ancient wisdom.*

<sup>6</sup>How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God?

Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves?

<sup>7</sup>Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin?

<sup>8</sup>But he'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.

### **Psalm 15**

*Some scholars argue that we have looked at this passage from the wrong angle. Traditionally we have viewed this as instruction for getting **into** the Temple—for being welcomed into the divine presence. Instead, we are invited to see this as an **exit strategy** ...how we are to conduct ourselves faithfully in the world.*

<sup>1</sup>God, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list?

<sup>2</sup>"Walk straight, act right, tell the truth.

<sup>3</sup>"Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbor; <sup>4</sup>despise the despicable.

"Keep your word even when it costs you, <sup>5</sup>make an honest living, never take a bribe.

"You'll never get blacklisted if you live like this."

*Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.*

**THANKS BE TO GOD!**

### **Sermon – "Outdated values or timeless wisdom???"**

Last week on TV, there was a short report on a new emerging trend; I assume it's emerging in the US, etiquette classes for young children. The reporter doing the

story took us into a room and there was a large square table with place settings for dinner and then all these little toddlers running around the table. At the head table with a big projection screen behind her was the instructor explaining how to unfold your napkin and put it on your lap, what utensils to use and how to hold them when you are cutting, how to hold them when you are eating, how to close your mouth and chew with your mouth closed and all of this good stuff. Did any of you do that with your children? Did it work? At the end of the report the parents were brought in and they observed and then they were interviewed and they all, without exception, raved at what a difference it had made! They were now safe to take their children out in public to eat. Which is a big deal! Learning to eat in a civilized fashion is a little bit like what these 2 ancient writers were talking about today. Psalm 15 for instance is frequently read at Jewish funerals and I can tell you that I have read both passages from Micah 6 and Psalm 15 at many of the funerals I have conducted. They are both about how we go about walking with God in the world, how it is we live a faithful life, and what are the marks of a faithful life in the world? The curious thing about both of these passages is that they are not at all about what we do here in this place of worship. They are absolutely and completely what we do out there in the world. Now, as bad as our children's table manners are, we can survive them at home, it's when they do it in public that drives us crazy. I would sit in restaurants with the 'mommy evil eyes' on my kids, hoping they wouldn't do something embarrassing in public. And so what these ancient writers told those people of ancient Israel was the same thing. What you do in here is very nice but what you do out there is what really counts. That's what really tells a person about who you are and what you believe and how much of it has actually sunk in. If you want to know the importance we place on public table manners, for instance, have you ever watched Seinfeld, do you remember the episode about double-dipping? The people who take a chip, dip it, and go 'crunch', and then dip it again? How do you feel about when you see them doing that? It's horrible, it's disgusting! Whether it's chip dip or salsa or whatever. They've not thought about anyone but themselves. Now neither of these passages is about condemning worship because that's not the point at all. What they are saying is worship will have no meaning for you unless it has an impact on how you live out in the world. If worship hasn't transformed you, if it hasn't instructed you, giving you the core values, the ethics, the grounding to change how you live in the world, then it has been a waste of time. Because worship is about training us to live with others, to live out in the world, it's to give us the tools to live a moral ethical life, a life of value. So I have to say, and I admit this, I'm always suspicious, at least a little bit, of folk who dazzle me with their knowledge and memorization of scripture or who tell me energetically how much they go to church, and equally how much they go to a different church but they respect ours but you know they are trying way too hard. What always strikes me with those people is that they have all this knowledge but it doesn't seem to have made a pick of difference in how they act. It hasn't become a part of who they are.

Nigel Biggar, professor of Christian ethics at Oxford University in England, has written an interesting book about behaving in public. I bought that book in preparation

for my last sabbatical and he says in his book, "That morality merges with spirituality. Spirituality is, of course, a vague term that is now put to all kinds of things, some of them testing the bounds of coherence. In Christian hands however, it refers to the human beings relationship with God." To use Carl Bart's term, he is an esteemed systematic theologian, from the early 1900's, says it has to do with the vertical rather than the horizontal. As a human being understands God, so he understands himself, and as he understands himself, so he disposes himself with respect to those around him. This relationship, our spirituality, sprinkles down and out. These theological or spiritual or vertical dispositions then generate horizontal ones towards other human beings. Such as a lack of self-righteousness, readiness to learn for others, compassion for those who do wrong and patience in the face of persistent prejudice. So Nigel Biggar is saying that if we are to have a relationship with God, if our faith really matters to us, that it will necessarily have this trickle-down effect. To be spiritual is to be moral, to do otherwise is inconsistent, it's unfaithful. Now I will admit that moral or ethical living is not solely the purpose of Christians, all the great religions of the world address morality and ethical living, the Greek philosophers did in ancient Greece. They spent a lot of time thinking and talking about what the extension of kindness to the neighbour through the lens of reason was all about. They actually said the extension of kindness to your neighbour is worthy, it makes sense. They talked about how you derive benefit from being nice to other people, when you are nice to somebody you usually get that kick-back, it's good for you, it's good for them, so to the Greeks that made sense.

In the latest issue of the Harvard University Gazette, which you can look at on-line, and I just happened to Google this question and it came up – their cover article is "How Do You Lead a Good Life?" So when we ask these questions in church, just like the ancient Israelites asked, "How do I get into God's house?" "How do I lead a good life?" A history professor, Jill Lapore, at Harvard said, "What she sees as a good life is to do good quietly and to hold beauty dear." The dean of Divinity at Harvard, David Hampton said that "The good life involves concern for the well-being and flourishing of others, empathy, social justice and a commitment to try to make the world a better place." Forbes Magazine, another business publication, this time last year published a cover story called "The Ten Golden Rules for Living a Good Life." Everybody is concerned about it. The message is if you want to get right with God, if you want that sense of peace and contentment in your spiritual life. The reality is you are not going to get it by hiding away in church. You are not going to get it by lighting a candle and meditating for hours. Those are all good things, and they are helpful practices for lots of people, but what we hear from Micah, from the Psalmist, from the Greek philosophers, from all the religions of the world is... you're not going to get a good life on your own, you're only going to know a good life when you interact with others. It's an interesting thing. If you want to join a golf club, what do you do? You usually have to buy a share and then you have to pay annual dues. That's the way we get into most clubs. If you want to go to a medical school in Canada, you need good marks, a high score on your MCATs, but if you've known any young person who wants to get into medical school today, that's not enough, because much more weight is now given in

Canada's medical schools for the third part of the entry requirements. The third part is an essay of what you're doing in the world. The entrants have to show themselves to be involved in the community. My daughter had a close friend with very high marks, a high score on her MCATs and she didn't get into medical school. She ended up going to Scotland at the same time as Erin and doing first her master's in public health and then her PHD in public health, that didn't guarantee her a spot in the Canadian Medical School, what did get her in was spending 3 summers in a row as a public health volunteer in the Aberdeen and Glasgow slums. That was the measure of her suitability for medicine. The marks were great, the score on the standardized test was great, even going and doing 2 more degrees, ALL GOOD, but the real measure of her suitability was in her willingness to engage in a meaningful way in the community.

The common feature of all of this, and the message that we all take home today, is it's just like those kids going to the etiquettes classes. It's never just about me. It's never just about me! Our relationship with God is never just God and me, it's God and me in the world. Amy Oden, who teaches church history at St. Paul's School of Theology in Oklahoma City, has said that the life of faith is indeed a walk, a walk with God that reorients heart and life. To walk faithfully you change your heart, you change your vision on the world. Our faith and our worship are intimately, and must be intimately connected to the choices we make in life. So I think the question is not so much, what do I have to do to get into God's house, but more, will others see the presence of God in the way we live in public. AMEN