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Epiphany 4 Series A 2017

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Lent is fast approaching. If you have not already made plans for a midweek sermon series are looking for something to say on Wednesday nights, this came across my email account and I thought I would pass along – Dr. Charles Arrand at Concordia, St. Louis has prepared a Lenten series. You can find a link to it here: [http://store.csl.edu/lenten-sermon-series-the-art-of-living-by-faith/?utm_source=Concordia+Seminary+email+list&utm_campaign=e1808a71f0-Issue+%233.01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2e9d2a1870-e1808a71f0-80905137&ct=t\(\)&mc_cid=e1808a71f0&mc_eid=f012da0fa8](http://store.csl.edu/lenten-sermon-series-the-art-of-living-by-faith/?utm_source=Concordia+Seminary+email+list&utm_campaign=e1808a71f0-Issue+%233.01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2e9d2a1870-e1808a71f0-80905137&ct=t()&mc_cid=e1808a71f0&mc_eid=f012da0fa8)

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Jan, 29

The Jesus we worship is revealed to us today as the teacher, the teacher whose voice rang out on a mountaintop as he taught his disciples. Every Christian tradition has its primary sources. Lutherans tend to turn to Paul's words about justification in Galatians and Romans as a starting point for our theology. Those words will "trump" another interpretation for us. Hence we will read James in light of Romans and Galatians, not the other way around. Catholicism tends toward the letters of Peter and the Gospel of Matthew, especially chapter 18. The heirs of the radical Reformation of Switzerland will land on the Sermon on the Mount and thus the Hutterites, Mennonites and Amish will consider these words the very heart of Scripture. Because a few verses after our Gospel lesson today the Lord says we should not take an oath, the Amish will not take an oath, which prevents them from serving on jury duty. That text trumps the reading of Romans 13 or I Peter which exhort us to be submissive to civil authorities and seem to advocate that one can be a good Christian and participate in government.

The revelation of Christ as teacher is a tougher job for the preacher than revelation of Christ in the healing or other miraculous ministry. A miracle is a clear pointer toward divinity, at least for those who live in a post-enlightenment world. For the people of the pre-enlightenment, who often were rather credulous when it came to miracles, the miraculous was not the slam dunk sort of proof that we consider it. For them, the teacher was also an important marker of the divine. This is still true in certain eastern cultures who revere teachers as if they were divine, or certainly holy. If you have a clear and meaningful message to teach, you must be from God. Unfortunately our culture has reviled teachers and there is a serious anti-education ethos which can be found within the student populations in many high schools today, particularly among young men. A few years ago Concordia University at which I teach received an incoming freshman class of nearly 250 students, 47 of which were men. This is not just CU. The college population is tilting toward women in disturbing ways.

Our people will hear Jesus teach today. Will we hear that in wonder and awe or will we think back to the high school English, History, or Algebra teacher we loathed? The wonder of this text and the preaching of the Gospel is often lost on us. Jesus says that his sheep know his voice (John 10). Today, in the preaching and the reading of these passages, Jesus is heard by the people of your congregation. He continues to draw people to his teaching ministry. In truth, this is one of the things that we Lutherans are noted for and which we do rather well. We teach because Christ taught. This brings us to another point about education. I think we sometimes

need to take that a little more seriously than we have done. Too often our serious teaching breaks off after confirmation and we tend to play games with adults. Of course this is endemic to the Christian scene in North America as most serious education of people ends sometime after about second grade when students won't come unless it is "fun." Jesus seriously and honestly engages the adult mind and person in his teaching.

Jesus teaches, is that a problem? In fact, because Easter is late and the season is allowed to run nearly as long as possible, Series A has us hearing the Sermon on the Mount for the rest of the season, save the Sunday of Transfiguration. This teaching ministry of Jesus is really important. The Sermon on the Mount, however, is a challenge for anyone who ascends to the pulpit. I think it gets much easier if you understand that Matthew contextualizes the words of Jesus with the miraculous ministry which follows.

What I mean is this: The Sermon on the Mount always makes me feel like such a failure. I have spoken hard words to my brother, I have the evil thoughts and the terrible things in me that Jesus talks about and condemns. I worry. All the things which Jesus says, "Don't do!" I do them. In the words of one of my students a few years ago, the Sermon on the Mount makes me feel "really icky." Then, Jesus walks down the mountain in 8:1-4 and the first thing he does is reach out and touch the ickiest person you can imagine, a leper, and he heals him of his ickiness. That's gospel. Unfortunately, our Gospel readings never quite get there! We have four more weeks of the Sermon on the Mount. Then we have the seasons of Lent and Easter. But because they are late, the very stories which tell us about Jesus healing ministry in Matthew 8-9, immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, are omitted and the after Easter reading of Matthew picks up in chapter 10. We will have to work at this a little bit.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptation; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer is used more than once in our lectionary and the idea is written large in Lutheran theology. We are incapable, only God is truly capable. Our capabilities come only from Him. Of course, as we have previously noted, this runs somewhat contrary to our culture. The preacher will want to identify what are the dangers in the face of which our frailty is to be seen. For first century Christians who were frequently persecuted, the dangers and temptations would have been pretty obvious. For us it might be a little less clear. What is a danger for one may not be for another. What is a temptation or a problem in one place may not be universally so. What does it mean that we cannot stand upright? What has us hunched over like dowagers and old men shuffling down the halls of a nursing home? Not a picture I like to think about myself, but the prayer forces me. What has bent me over? Is it my fear? Is it my pride which refuses God's help? Is it my stunted prayer development or greed?

We want strength and protection to support us in danger and carry us in temptation. Notice the switch there. I would normally pray for someone to carry me through danger and support me in temptation. But my shock at the word order really says something about my latent belief in my own abilities. I think I only need support in temptation because I believe I can resist. But the prayer gets this right. The temptations are the greater problem for us. That is where God really needs to carry us. The dangers are not as problematic. After all if the Devil takes my life, I am in God's hands. Is it perhaps the temptations which would give me occasion to lose that most precious gift of faith? Is that the real temptation? Is it the self-assured modernity which scoffs at the idea of miracles and suggests that anyone who actually believes such a thing is a troglodyte and belongs in some backwoods hut deep in the fundamentalist South? Is it the post-modern assertion that all is good, and if you suggest that all is not good, you are an intolerant monster who has no place in this society? What tempts our folks today to shipwreck their faith?

What are the dangers for which we need support and the temptations in which we need to be carried? Do any of our people see them? Do they seem them that way? How will we preach about this?

Readings

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says:

Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

²Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the LORD has an indictment against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

³“O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I wearied you? Answer me!

⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised,
and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

If you are thinking of preaching this, you might try using two readers for this text, have the first one, preferably the one with the most God-like voice, read the first part and then the second one pick up with this reading at verse 6.

What does the Lord require of us in the last verse? Does he not require Christ himself? I cannot meet that measure, but he can. God and God alone can meet that measure. If you want to read a powerful treatment of this, consider Athanasius “On the Incarnation.” There are multiple translations out there. It was a favorite of C. S. Lewis.

This verse also reads really well into the Beatitudes. We might call it a prologue of sorts. Could it help us frame those homiletically challenging verses? Does this verse encompass those verses, a thesis statement of the Beatitudes?

Could this be a message of really good news for the weary and the burned out Christians who are feeling like the weight of the Kingdom is resting on their shoulders? How can we start to see the privilege of what we do and the reality that this is not a payment made, not a requirement, but an opportunity? Of course that will involve what might be a painful reorientation of life. We often turn our other stuff into the real kingdom stuff and lose sight of this. God only asks us to walk in that faith relationship with him, humbly, with justice and love. That is a huge command and expectation, but that is exactly what Christ gives us. He does not lay on us the burden of success or results. He explicitly says that he does that.

For the first time since early December and Christmas II, we have an OT reading other than Isaiah. Of course, it is Isaiah’s contemporary, Micah. Are there not a bunch of stories in the Old Testament too? Don’t get me wrong, I love Isaiah, but I also like to preach about the narratives and stories in the text. I think my people need to hear them.

Of course, Micah actually has a story in it. God is not happy. In fact, God is suing the people of Israel for breach of contract. In Hebrew, he is bringing a RIV(pronounced “reev”) or a lawsuit against the people of Israel. They have not kept the covenant which he established on Sinai through Moses.

In ancient treaties the king often called upon the gods as witnesses to the covenant. God of course does not do that, whom could he call upon? He calls upon the mountains and hills to bear witness. So, Micah brings out the witnesses in the first verses. They are to judge whether the covenant has been kept or broken.

Notice verse 3, this will be one of the foundation verses for the reproaches, the words which are sung in the Good Friday service as Christ on the cross is contemplated. As Jesus is dying we remember that our breach of covenant is what brought him there. The punishment that falls on him unjustly is justly ours. If you have never done the traditional Good Friday service, dig out your lectionary and look at those reproaches.

The prophet then shifts gears. The case is lost. What can we do to restore this? How can we make amends for our sin? God cannot be bought. He has no need of our sacrifice, even the firstborn from our own bodies could not buy this. (Think about that for a moment, both in terms of Passover and the Christian Passover we call Holy Week. Also think about God's testing of Abraham in Gen 22.)

God will be satisfied with nothing less than your heart and whole self. The righteous deed done as a payment is not righteous. The humble walk, the love of kindness, the justice done, this is not a formula for living in some way to please God but it is a formula for a relationship between the human and his creator. The day comes when this perfectly describes us, for it perfectly describes the citizen of heaven. There we will no longer desire the evil nor seek the sin.

But now, it also points to the justice of God's case against us. I do not love the good with my whole heart. The old man lurks yet in my mind and heart. He delights in darkness, the Schadenfreude, the lustful pleasure, the delusion that we possess that which belongs to God. He slavers greedily in the corners, even while my better self seems to be in control and I am doing good.

With Micah we often find ourselves outside looking in on that relationship which makes the first part of the text so important. Read it again and you will find that God marshals his case against us but in the end pleads with us. Won't you come back? God also desires this right relationship in which we are fully in love with him and he with us and that reflects in the living of our life and thoughts of our mind and the feelings of our heart. He will pursue the case, but he will not pursue our death. He will unite with us in Christ and bear that punishment on our behalf. Justice will be served, and life will be given in one bold and awesome event. Our first born could not bear that load, but His first born, his only born, can and did.

Do we need to remember that God wants the sinner, the folks who are tired and weary may need to remember that God's great interest is in the relationship, not in some obedience on our part. That is really frightening for the person invested in the program and who is depending on the offerings made and the volunteers who serve. Are we saying in this that such people can check out of such offerings and service?

Psalm 15

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

² He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
³ who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
⁴ in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honors those who fear the LORD;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
⁵ who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved.

The selection of this psalm with the Micah text and the Beatitudes has to be a development of the Law. The question which leads this reading off will be heard as a terrible and frightening question for anyone who is taking a serious look at his or her life. The standard which God establishes is high: a blameless walk, true speaking from the heart, does no evil, reproaches no neighbor, etc. The preacher, however, if he should use this text cannot leave it there. While this cannot but condemn us as it is applied to us, it saves us when it is applied to the Christ who gave his life for mine. The psalmist condemns my failings and implies their consequence: I have no place in God's house. But he also speaks beautifully of the Christ who saves me. The Law has that strange function. It not only points to my failures but it also points to Christ's righteousness, the very righteousness which Christ has imparted to me.

I Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

This Jesus not only teaches, but he turns the world upside down. Power is not the mover of the world, but indeed love is. God has a special spot for little people. He loves them when the world would cast them aside as worthless. The world values the strong, the wise, the important. It calls them noble and heaps its honors upon them. God holds the poor man in his hands and delights to pick him up, set him upon his feet and attend to his needs, great and small.

This weakness and poverty, however, ought not only to be seen in terms of its economic realities. To do so is to make the mistake of Marx. The economically potent in the world can also be morally bankrupt, in fact we find that they often are, excusing the inexcusable with cash. Just recently a young man killed driving drunk and was given a light sentence because he was too privileged and had not learned to make good moral decisions. Our people, many of which have suffered brutally in the current economic recession know this well. The bankers get bailed out, the homeowners find the stimulus to be less than stimulating sometimes. We of course almost always give them a pass on this. What we would likely call the behavior of a spoiled brat gets glamorized when perpetrator's last name is Bieber, Hilton or Kardashian. Yet, the implications of this are profound. Does God hold the morally challenged, the mentally challenged, the economically challenged, and the physically challenged in the same hand? Did Jesus die for all of this?

Our boast is not in ourselves, no matter our capacity, it is in the Lord and only in the Lord. Americans today have a hard time relating to these words which Paul preaches. Life-long Lutherans have often find such humility mixed into their childhood breakfast cereal so they are not shocked by what Paul is saying here. (My very Lutheran grandfather began almost every day with what he called "hofferschleim" which literally translates as "oat slime." Hard not to be humble when you have that first thing in the morning!) But I wonder how often they are not, oxymoronically, a little proud of their humility. God loves humble people, I sure am glad that I am humble so God can love me. Paul advocates here and in other places, notably in Philippians 2, an ethos which was utterly upside-down to a normal Roman and increasingly to a normal American. The man who ponders his own humility is still pondering himself. Paul advocates for a life which is truly centered on Christ.

When medieval Europe found itself in need of renewal it was a Francis of Assisi and a Dominic who attracted great followings and called the whole civilization to repentance by giving up everything, donning the rough spun habit of a penitent and begging for their meals, even though both of them came from wealthy backgrounds. They were not well liked by their contemporaries and the good solid folk of the 13th century whose children ran off to follow them thought they had joined some freakish cult. Yet in their renunciation of all things for the sake of Christ they gained a stature which no wealth or power could have given them. God has used the weak and the powerless to shame the strong and the important of the world. How will he do that for this generation? Perhaps, and this is dangerous, deacons will be the instrument for God to shame the preachers, but not because that is our goal but because in emptying ourselves in service to Him

we are made into the instruments of God for the sake of his precious people. How's that for subversive?

Paul is deep into an argument here about the unity which the congregation in Corinth needs. Pride, the sort of self-focused and blind pride which sees nothing else, is toxic to unity and brotherhood. Paul's ability to put his arm around Sosthenes (hard to believe that was less than 20 verses before the start of this reading!) is directly connected to the upside-down world which Christ's cross and love implies. The focus upon the other, the humility, and the self-sacrifice will be the key ingredients for a true unity. Without this ability to cast one's vision outside the self, we will always be at war with one another. Shared goals and by-laws will never keep us together in the long run.

If we use "boast" in Paul's more positive usage, the sense in which we recount the important things of our lives, how do we see people (ourselves included!) boasting outside of Christ?

- 1. The human normal boast is to try to separate myself from the other by a favorable comparison, usually by pointing out the problems of the other which I don't have or at least I don't want to admit. We see boasting in anything other than Christ driving us apart, it is divisive. We will be pointing to the competitive things we value. This atomizes us, forces us into mindset in which everyone is a potential competitor, not a potential fellow member of the body of Christ. This will result in judgmental attitudes and behaviors. I need to point out the problems of my neighbor because it somehow affirms me.*
- 2. Boasting outside of Christ is rooted in the sin our first parents: a form of self-idolatry. We will turn the conversation to ourselves, our accomplishments, our needs, our rights, our... (this list doesn't really end!) In this sort of boasting I am in the center of this universe and everything else is judged based on what it does to me.*
- 3. Boasting in anything other than Christ will find that it does eventually trust in Christ, but only as a last resort. Boasting in anything other than Christ starts somewhere else, it begins with me and my injured sense of pride, righteousness, justice, etc. It will always run in the avenues of power, not service. It only comes to virtue unwillingly.*
- 4. Boasting in something other than Christ will always expect God to notice me, what I have done, how many times I go to Church, how much I give, or even just that I am straight and not gay. God must love me more than them.*
- 5. Boasting outside of Christ will pay attention to being right and proper people, or being the right sort of rebel, it can run in all sorts of dogma and set up all sorts of rules. It will find that we use the right sort of worship songs, or we support the right sort of causes. It will have a narrowness of perspective. It often will reserve its most vitriolic antipathy for the people who are actually closest to us but just different enough to be distinguished.*

But we also need to describe and point to boasting in Christ, this person who looks at the foolishness of God and finds instead the wisdom, power, righteousness, and sanctification of which Paul speaks above. What does that look like?

1. *We don't ask God to make sense to us, at least not by human standards. We are OK with God not making sense in his decision to forgive. God uses the most unlikely instruments, people like Jonah, Saul of Tarsus, and the slave Joseph or the murderer Moses. Jeremiah will raise the logical argument why he cannot be a prophet. God agrees and sends him anyway.*
2. *Boasting in Christ will make Jesus the subject of lots of verbs. It turns our language. It no longer talks about us so much, but it talks about Jesus. Not because Jesus is keeping track or there is a word count going on somewhere, but because boasting in Christ means noticing that he is doing things.*
3. *The Christ boast acknowledges that I am not wise/strong/good/righteous etc. on my own terms and likewise neither are you. Your problems are likely different from my problems, but we both stand in the presence of God by Christ's gracious action on our behalf.*
4. *Boasting in Christ will find God's good in the middle of troubles. It will even find that suffering is an occasion for Christ's Kingdom to come. The cross, the mechanism of God's great deed for us, involved suffering. Boasting in Christ will not seek the suffering, but it will not flinch from it either. It will take what the world throws at us and frustrate that worldly desire by seeing that in this moment of suffering, I look a lot like Jesus. (look at the last verses of the Beatitudes passage below!)*
5. *Boasting in Christ draws people together. It is not divisive, but it is cohesive. The same Jesus who did this wonderful thing in me is at work in you. That makes us one in Christ.*

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Remember the discussion of the OT reading. Is verse 8 of the OT lesson the best way to approach the Beatitudes? Do we understand these verses as connected to that demand of God which he spoke through Micah?

Can we say “Jesus was poor in spirit, hence the kingdom of heaven is mine”

Can we say: “Jesus was meek, hence I inherit the earth.” Isn’t this simply Isaiah 53?

Can we say: ...

Insofar as my life looks like his life, does that now remind me not of my own righteousness but of the blessing he has given me? Sometimes I do mourn, sometimes I am persecuted, sometimes I do hunger and thirst for what is right because my life is filled with injustice. When I feel these very different things, experience these emotions, can I see that I am blessed because Christ was too, and now that means I inherit, am comforted? Consider Paul’s letter to the Philippians or Colossians where he says much the same thing.

I have expressed my frustration with this part of Scripture for preaching in years past. I find it hard to get my mind around this critter, to find the overarching themes, but then again, perhaps they are just staring me in the face and I am too dense to see them.

Blessing would seem to be one of the consistent themes in these verses, would you not say. That is a fascinating word study. Did you know that bless and bleed come from the same root in English? (Not in Greek, but in the old Saxon they are the same thing.) Is my blessing his bleeding?

Jesus seems to be blessing all sorts of people, some who are getting it right, the peacemakers and the pure in heart, others who are perhaps not thinking things are going so well, the mourning and the poor in spirit. Do those who hunger and thirst for righteousness hunger and thirst because they lack that righteousness? Is that a good thing? Or do they, filled with God’s righteousness, hunger and thirst to see that same righteousness done in the world around them, sort of hungering for an end to slavery or something like that? I can see the latter as a virtue, but the former sounds like a lot of the Lenten sermons I have heard which remind me of my lack of righteousness.

I have on several occasions preached this simply as the fact that everyone, no matter what their condition gets exactly the same thing, blessing. It surely results in something for each of us which each of us needs. After all, to throw a life preserver to a fellow walking down the street will not be a salutary act, but may well be interpreted as an assault by the locale magistrate. But no matter what we need, all the remedies fall under one category – blessing. Christ bleeds for us.

Of course, one might also point to the rather disturbing blessing which comes at the end, the blessing for the persecuted, which seems to really get Jesus' pedagogical juices flowing. He expands on this one like no other. Do I really want that blessing?

Law

1. We are fundamentally incompetent when it comes to the deepest problems that face us. We have successfully dealt with the minor issues. My glasses help me see when eyes begin to fail, my pain medication means I am not totally crippled by arthritis. A little surgery makes walking possible after I push this old body a little too far and tear some ligaments in my knee. But these are all temporary measures. The grave awaits me and there is nothing I can do about. I am incapable before it. I am incapable before sin, before my enemy the Devil, before the forces of this world that would devour me. You might find folks who were counting on a retirement based on mutual fund growth resonating to this after the wild gyrations of the stock market in the past few years. What I thought I could manage and control may be completely out of my control. Will a return of inflation destroy all my efforts to save? Does anyone think the government can really solve this problem?
2. The incompetence before the forces of nature, death, economics, and politics turns truly frightening when our gaze is honestly turned inward. The slathering and lustful old man has not gone away, but waits for our moment of weakness. Personal piety and uprightness can only be achieved by rigid control of our heart's desires and our mind's too. He is utterly beyond training and to relax our vigilance we know will result in our fall, as it does most days. We might find some success against him through Christ, but it is always a wrestler's clinch we must hold on him. There is no rest in this personal war. We cannot change who we are. Jesus will point this out with horrifying specificity in the words which follow the beatitudes and sum them up with God's brutal indictment: Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect (Mt 5:48)
3. Shall we despair of God's help? That is the way of Satan, his fondest desire. But this yet another form of pride. My problems are so big that they dwarf even Christ's sacrifice? Who can say that? And yet some do.
4. Our enemy works hard on us. He knows that if he can get us to focus on one problem and forget about others, his battle is half won. If we righteously rail against some sin in the community, but turn a blind eye toward the sins in our own home, what is the difference between me and them? Have you ever thought about the fact that there are no dead people in heaven? You must be alive, truly alive, to walk its golden streets. All of us have a God problem. Each of us must have a God solution. Our minds need to be trained to see this.

Gospel

1. Jesus comes to the whole person. He is not just interested in some disembodied spirit, but he teaches the mind, he heals the body, he restores the relationship, and he loves your marriage and your family. His blood shed upon a cross is shed because we are morally challenged but also because children are hungry today, because homeless people are freezing and refugees are living in squalor. Jesus died for the rich man whose family is in shambles and the poor man whose heart clutches after the wealth he does not have.
2. Jesus works in strange ways, often in ways that seem back ward to us and upside-down. It would not have been our first choice to change the world with a dozen fishermen, tax collectors and nobodies in Galilee who preached a crucified Rabbi. We would have chosen emperors and senators, generals and armies, wealthy and powerful people. We would have failed. His kingdom, as quirky as it looks, works. (I was really attracted to the way that sentence sounded when I said it. Try it, say it aloud, the piling up of the “k” sounds make it memorable – good preachers are always listening to the way their words sound too.)
3. Jesus is not put off by the magnitude of our problems. Like the folks in Micah’s day, he has every reason to haul us into court, convict and throw away the key, but we find the Lord pleading with us there. He wants our love, not some retribution. He wants to walk with us in the garden again, without our fear, without our “payment” but as the creator and his creatures delighting in each other. He will move heaven and earth to achieve that, he will give his one and only born.
4. That Jesus who walks to Calvary truly calls all of us blessed, no matter what he sees in us today. He delights in the good which we do for him. He loves to see us making peace and striving for justice and goodness. He loves it when our words on his account are spoken with boldness and fearlessness, perhaps in the face of fearsome persecution. Yet, he does not turn his face from the other truths about us, but with the same hand blesses the man whose spirit is poor, whose eyes are filled with tears as he surveys the wreckage of his life, who hungers for the righteousness which eludes all of us. His blessing is universally given.

Sermon Ideas

1. Shall I offer the first born of my body for the sin of my soul? (OT/Gospel lesson: That God would calm the fears and anxieties of the people who hear this sermon with the sweet news that He has taken up the burden and paid the price we could not.)

Micah poses this odd question to us. Our problem is profound, but the preacher may have some work to do at this early point. Our culture has drunk deeply of medieval mystical

wells and holds that we are basically good people, perhaps a little flawed, but basically good. If I do something wrong, there must be a logical reason, perhaps my childhood was somehow abusive or I have suffered some trauma. Indeed, if we do something really wrong, chances are we could simply play the victim card and get invited to a daytime talk show like Oprah. We would shed some tears and get lots of attention.

Micah will hear none of this. We have a profound problem. God has a case against us. He has convened the court, laid out the evidence, and it is damning, very damning. Micah would place us in that moment when the sinner realizes that he/she has much bigger problems than middle age or a shaky retirement account. God is the problem for me, and he is a very large problem.

In our frenzy we think of the most valuable thing we might sacrifice to buy off God from his wrath. At that point Micah takes it up another step and then tells us not good enough, not even that first born child we joke that the bankers will get from us. There is no sacrifice I can make. I am left with a quandary, a problem I cannot solve.

But God can. Should I give God some sacrifice? He has made it all. He doesn't need a single thing that I have to give him. Yet, oddly, and for reasons he has never really revealed other than that he loves me, he wants me. Not to use me or abuse me, but he wants me, he loves me.

Because I could not buy my way into his affection, he has paid the price and born the burden that he might gain access to my heart. He is not so interested in my obedience; although, he delights in my life as a father delights in the gifts of his children to him. He doesn't need it, but he loves the affection that moved the gift. He blesses me.

We can think of a thousand reasons why God should not want us, and they are all true. Yet he does. We can think of another thousand reasons that my service rendered to him should be rejected, and they are all true. Yet, he delights in it. We can think of a thousand reasons he ought to condemn us, yet he needs only one reason to save us: Jesus.

2. Our Boast is in Christ (Epistle reading: That God would by the powerful working of the Spirit, remove the self from the center of the hearer's life, and replace that center with Christ himself and thereby create the true unity in this place.)

My mother was pretty good about telling me not be boastful. But she apparently skipped over this verse in Corinthians in which Paul seems to tell us to boast. We have a little cultural issue to get over here. In Paul's day, the word boast was not a negative like it is for us. In the Roman world to boast was simply to recount what you had done. For Caesar, returning from the Gallic wars, he boasted that he had conquered the Gauls. He was an arrogant man, no mistake, but no one thought that he should not have written his account or made public what he and his soldiers had done.

This is doubly problematic because our culture, while it may frown on boasting, effectively has us boast in Paul's sense in ourselves. The individualism which has so infused our culture turns us into a person who boasts in ourselves. We may not use the word, but we do it, every time we dive into that individualism. It is normal, we expect life to be this way. This sermon can challenge the normal way we see the world in which I am the subject of all the verbs and this is all about me.

Think about boasting like a resume or a Curriculum Vitae. If my last job promoted me to regional manager, no one would think less of me for putting that on the resume. If I won a national or other honor for my work, I should put that on there too. This would all fall under the category of boasting in Paul's world. Of course, Romans, like us, thought that padding your resume or boasting about things you had not done was decidedly against the rules. So we may need to spend a moment on this word itself.

That said, Paul is attacking the very fabric of Roman society here. They all boasted like this, it was normal, even expected. Indeed, Roman society was fiercely competitive about it. They would have written those Christmas letters you get from some people which tell you about all the wonderful things they have done. You know the letter, the one that manages to make you feel inadequate and stupid at the same time.

Paul says that the boast of the Christian is not in anything I have done. My boast is in the cross of Christ. My boast is only in a world in which I am in orbit around Jesus. He is the center of my universe, he is the gravity that pulls my life along.

While this is disturbing to the old man who believes he does belong at the center of the universe, this is a very good thing. My life is not defined by what I have done but by what Jesus has done. Have you ever been asked about who you are? Usually we respond with a form of Roman boasting, our name and then our vocation or place in life. "My name is Phil, I am a Pastor, husband, father,..." etc. What if we started those conversations with simply, I am someone for whom Jesus died. It might really prevent unwanted conversations at our wife's office Christmas party.

How will we boast of the Lord Jesus? How will his name and our great love for him show up on our lips?

This has a profound impact on our lives together as a congregation. Too often congregations become a place where I can show off, where I can exercise power, where I can have one place where I am top dog. If our families are troubled, I will bring that trouble here. If my work demeans me, I will demean someone here because it makes me feel powerful for just a moment.

But our boast is in Christ. That changes all those things. He is the giver, I am the recipient. Whatever I have, I have from him. That removes me from the center of that picture in a way which empowers a true brotherhood among us. We are all united in Him,

not in something which we bring to the table, nor in our agreement with each other. He has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified through his Spirit.

Illustrating this sermon is important. I remember the period in my first parish in which three of my most influential and important households all announced that they had taken positions in other states and soon would be leaving. It was a small parish and I was really worried about this. I remember one day leaving my office upset and afraid, and suddenly it dawned me that I was saved by Grace, not through works, but through faith. It was not mine to boast about. It was as if God was telling me that this was his parish, not mine. He would take care of it, and I did not need this worry and fear. I walked into the house in a very different frame of mind. I had left the office and I was the subject of all the verbs, when I walked in the front door of my home, God was the subject of the verbs. And he came through. Within a year, we missed the friends who had left, but God raised up new leaders, brought new members, and we were stronger and better as a parish. And I had done none of it, God had done it all. The preacher will need to find his own story to tell about this, but a little episode like this can make all the difference.

3. The Requirement of the Lord (OT and Gospel readings - That God would lay his gentle requirement on the people of this congregation, giving them the humility, love of mercy/kindness, and justice which he demands and his Spirit provides.)

This sermon creates a tension for our folks by laying out the demand of God, the description of the blessed person as Jesus speaks the beatitudes, and letting them do their work. It will not take long for people to be uncomfortable with that. I have not been meek, I have not been pure in heart, peace-making, or many of the things of which Jesus talks. Micah's requirement is terrible in one respect, justice I had for it condemns me. Mercy I despise, and to walk in humility is beyond me.

But the Gospel is not to take away the requirement here, but to take me out of the center of this picture and put Christ there where he belongs. Already 800 years before he was born, Micah heard God demand Jesus of us. Jesus speaks to his audience in the first century and describes himself, and then gives himself to the very men and women who failed so miserably.

As Micah said earlier, there is no sacrifice which can possibly measure up to God's demands, not even if I try real hard and do my best. But Jesus is a sacrifice on a whole other scope and scale. And this is the really good part: he has imparted his very self to me. The demand of Micah is met in Him, and the very innocence and righteousness of Christ, lacking in my life, has been given to me in my baptism and infuses my life from this altar. Now, throughout my life, when I experience the taste of the things that Jesus speaks of, the persecution and mourning, the good in my life, the moment when I make the peace or actually do something with a pure heart, or when I am hungering and thirsting for a righteousness I desperately need, in all those times, I hear Jesus say to me "blessed are you...." I remember that he was meek once, he was numbered with the poor

even though he owned the universe. He was persecuted, and always pure in heart. He hungered for righteousness and justice on that day when the whip bit and drew his blood. And it was my righteousness which he pursued and obtained.

And here is the really sweet thing. The blessing of Christ is not limited to those times when I feel the things Jesus speaks of in the beatitudes. Perhaps in these times I am especially tuned in to hear it, but Jesus is always, on the best day, on the worst day, and every day in between, blessing me.

We might work a wedding anniversary into this. The blessing of that marriage is always there. But we all know that marriages have those up and down days. But they are always married, on the good days and the tough days. The blessing endures.

God requires something of us, and he has given it. Rest in him.