

Minimalism as Love

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock Service, January 30, 2011, The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12.*

A transition that is talked about too much, particularly from the pulpit, can grow old very quickly. I know that. But even with that risk, I beg your pardon for one brief moment about the Vestry's announcement last week and promise not to take sermon time for it again. At least for a long time.

I am profoundly and humbly honored by the prospect presented by the Vestry and pledge to you, the people of this remarkable place, my very best. When I arrived here three years ago, I was primarily concerned with attempting to convince an imposing group of sophisticated New Yorkers that a grown man called "Buddy" could be taken seriously. In some ways, my imagination did not extend much beyond that, let alone the contemplation of such an opportunity as this; but for me, it was a match made in heaven. The mission we share in this place, granted such heft by its location and history, is worthy and demanding of our best. It is not an attitude of arrogance but of humble service to recognize the potential we have from this particular vantage point and to embrace it with all that we have. My great hope is that we will do that together for a good time to come.

Interestingly, it is short verse written in the 8th century before Christ that tells us what it is that we are to do now, tells us what it is that God requires of us at this juncture and at all others in our lives: We are called "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." If we do that to the best of our ability and with the grace of God, we will do our part in bringing the realm of God into the part of this world it is ours to impact.

Proudly reductionist, these seminal words written by Micah so many centuries ago do for us what they did for his hearers. They provide us a clarifying call that cuts through the cacophonous and endless chatter to which we as God's people are sometimes prone, telling us that despite the complexity of our lives, the truth of what God wants of us is fairly simple, understandable even if not easy. The message is not unlike what we once read weekly in the older rite of the church's liturgy, the Summary of the Law. I hear it best in its traditional translation: "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." The context for these cut-to-the-chase phrases is as relevant for us as it was in the times of Micah and of Jesus.

The book of Micah has all the elements of a tensely charged courtroom drama that is not difficult for us to imagine: the defendant, in this case the people of Israel, standing before the judge, in this case Almighty God. Much has gone awry. God's plan for creation has not worked. Justice has been mocked; kindness has been reserved for the rich and powerful; love of God has been overshadowed with love of self. In the imagined drama, God's response is a staccato of rapid questions.

"What did I do, O my people, that you would act like this? Don't you remember how I traveled with you from Egypt through the Red Sea, through the wilderness to the land of promise? Don't you know I have always nestled you in the palm of my hand? Don't you remember those enemies out there in the desert—bigger, stronger, and better armed than you—and, yet, I led you to safety? I showed you the way, and, yet, you have chosen not to walk with me."

Finally, one intrepid soul dares speak: "What do you want of me? If I come and bow down before you, is that enough? I'll come every Sabbath, every day if you wish and fall before you. Shall I bring an offering—the right gift, the biggest; not one fine ram but a thousand rams and ten thousand rivers of oil? Will that be enough? What about my first born—will that get you off my back?"

And the response of God: "No, not that, just this: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."

To this day, we are stunned by the clarity and challenge of the words. God is indeed demanding; God wants us—not just what we have or what we can offer. God wants us to be transformed, perhaps a better word would be "reformed," returned to that state for which we were created, a way of being from which justice, mercy and love flow as easily as breathing in and breathing out. Otherwise the most beautifully executed liturgy, the most brilliant preaching, the busiest church involvement are for nothing.

Mercy (or kindness as the New Revised Standard translates it) is pretty easy. And it is very important. Mercy is at least the start of what we do in most of our community ministry. It fills stomachs, gives a warm, safe place to sleep, provides a big bag or several bags of groceries, buys the occasional bus ticket—all good things. We only occasionally hear the drone of a voice within, which questions whether our recipients do all they could to help themselves, a dark reminder that on some level even we who love mercy wonder if we have what we have because we deserve it.

The search for justice, as we all know, is even more complicated; even semantically the concept is harder to grasp. Justice on one hand correctly has to do with giving people what they deserve.

Demanded by contract, social and otherwise, it is codified by law and properly revered. But this is only part of what we mean by justice. The justice that God tells us to do—interestingly we are told to do justice, whether or not we love it—is broader, kinder and more forgiving than what we think of in our judicial system.

Godly justice has to do with attacking the systemic ills of our society even if to do so causes us to risk ourselves and our positions, our good standing, in the process. If we insist upon honestly considering the institutionalized reasons why the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, upon talking about the fact that one in ten black men in this country lands in prison, or asking what it means that we as a nation still support capital punishment, not singularly but nearly so among developed countries, if we insist upon engaging in such disruptive conversation, some will find us tiresome or worse. Trust me on that, and these issues are just my hot button items. Add your own. What prevents my being unbearably sanctimonious in their regard is the awareness that I am oblivious, as people of privilege always are, to innumerable injustices to which I am totally blind.

Justice in the Judaic-Christian tradition is about fidelity, about being faithful to relationship and responsibilities that come from our covenant with God. For the Israelites, justice was meted out through a network of relationships. The people of God were to care for their own, while offering temporary (merciful) hospitality to the occasional stranger. Jesus expanded the rules: “Caring just for your own,” he said, “is not enough. Loving your neighbor is bigger than you have imagined. In fact, your neighborhood is the whole world of creation.” Doing justice broadens our world almost unimaginably, requiring that we see with eyes wide open, no longer having the luxury of beholding only our own kind. It means that there is no one, absolutely no one, of whom we can say, “You are of no consequence to me.” No one can be summarily dismissed as unnecessary—neither a single person nor a class of people; no one can be regarded as a worthless loser.

We are called to be extreme minimalists in doctrine and extravagant activists in life. All of this, the way we worship, the attention we give teaching and studying, all of this—which I love with abandon and no doubt some disproportion—exists simply to ignite our passion for doing justice and loving kindness. Our walk with God—humble, tentative, outrageous—is but for this. If all that we do in this place, the worshipping, the praying, the learning, the loving of one another, the singing, if all of that does not serve that passion, then our walk with God is distorted and even dangerous.

Here is a news bulletin, beloved friends: religion can run amok. In a stunning example of how wrong religious practice can go, David Kato, a Ugandan gay rights activist, was brutally murdered this week after years of living with threats often fueled and justified by the religious community in his country. The Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Henry Orombi, supports laws that would imprison same-sex couples for simple acts of physical affection, basing his position on his understanding of doctrinal purity. His support and the positions taken by less radicalized clerics around the world—including the US, lest we wrongly conclude that the trouble is just way “over there”—help create a culture that fosters violence. Since Mr. Kato’s death, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks have been ablaze with those who see this death as yet one more nail in the coffin of organized religion. It breaks my heart but deepens my commitment that places like this have to unabashedly and fearlessly say it isn’t so. David Kato risked everything; and so must we risk it all for love and truth and justice.

Minimalists in doctrine, activists in life we are. And as such, we stand on solid ground for “he has told us, O mortal, what is good; and what the LORD requires of us—to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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