

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 29, 2023

4 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

+ + +

When you go to college in Georgia, you're going to end up listening to a certain amount of country music.

There was one song that was huge during my freshman year of college in Atlanta, Georgia, by the singer Kenny Rogers; the one who was famous for the song "The Gambler" back in the 70's, about how you've got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. This was toward the end of his career; in fact he was 61 and it made him the oldest singer ever to hit #1 on the Billboard country music chart. It was called "Buy Me a Rose" and it was a nostalgic ballad about a husband who works hard to give his wife everything "he thinks she wants: three-car garage, her own credit card." So he works all the time and is never home. But what she really wants is him. "Buy me a rose, call me from work; show me you love me by the look in your eyes."

They grow farther apart over the years until the bridge of the song when we get the big reveal: the husband is the narrator! It's Kenny. And in the last verse he realizes his mistake, goes to buy her a rose and heads home to start making up for all those years of lost time.

It's a sweet song. A little corny, in the way of a good country ballad. But poignant. It gets at how easy it is to put something else in the place of relationships, even with the ones we love the most, even when we think we're trying to please them. Those who love us may not want us to impress them with the big sacrifices we make on their behalf, so much as they simply want *us*.

We heard a famous passage from the prophet Micah today about how we do that with God. "With what shall I come before the LORD?" Micah asks rhetorically. Should I bring a whole burnt sacrifice, something lavish to burn on God's altar? Maybe a year-old calf? The passage starts there but then escalates pretty quickly to wild exaggeration: what if I bring not just one animal but a few thousand rams? Tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Or maybe I should even resort to human sacrifice. Surely there's nothing more costly than that to prove my devotion to God. And then the hammer drops as God responds: do you think I need all these things? Are you trying to please me? I've already told you what I really want, throughout all the rest of the scriptures. And then the famous verse, one I learned as a song in Sunday School: 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?

Three things. Do justice. Love mercy. And walk humbly with God. Two instructions about our relationship with one another and a third about our relationship with God, except really you can't separate them out because we can't be in relationship with God without being in relationship with each other.

Today we are celebrating our Annual Parish Meeting, a time when we take stock of the year that has been and seek to hear where God is calling us together in 2023. As we do that, we couldn't have a better benchmark to look at our parish's life than these three things God seeks from us. Every aspect of our life together, from our worship to the classes we do together to our fellowship meals to our Open Table breakfast to our bookstore to our bridge club to the individual friendships that spring up over coffee in Farlander to the hand squeezed by a hospital bed; everything we do, big and small, prayer and worship, education, service and advocacy, life in community, we can ask: is it working to form us as a community of people who are becoming more truly human by doing justice, by loving mercy, by walking humbly with God?

I believe healthy congregations of people of faith are one of the most powerful and most underrated forces for transformation that exists in this world. And that's never been more important.

Here in our country right now we are still grieving two brutal shootings among our Asian American community right here in California. And we are reeling from the vicious images of police brutality against Tyre Nichols from earlier this month in Memphis. Acts of profound injustice, carried out without mercy. These are the latest incidents that manifest our society's complex, intertwined legacies of injustice around race and guns and policing.

Meanwhile these particular sicknesses of this place in this time are set against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, climate crisis, and all the other needs and sorrows of God's beautiful beloved world.

We might sometimes get discouraged and throw up our hands. We might even say, what good is a church in a time like this? Beautiful music, ancient liturgies, potlucks, picnics? We might be tempted to think we should close up shop. And indeed if what we are doing here on Sundays and throughout the week is about putting on a pretty show for God or for ourselves then we should. God does not need our presents. God needs us.

But we're wrong when we pit worship against justice or community life against outreach. Because true worship does justice and true fellowship does mercy. If our liturgies are genuine encounters with God's word in scripture and God's grace in the sacraments they will leave us transformed to do justice in our own lives and they will themselves be acts of justice. If the acts of service and advocacy we do together are shaped deeply by prayer and scripture they will soften hearts and win allies. If our potlucks and picnics nourish our members, guests and strangers alike with full bellies and warm hearts they will create disciples who are engines of transformation in our world.

God has shown us what is good. May we drink deeply from the well of God's grace, and may we be a people who thirsts for justice, who loves mercy, and who gathers in more and more of God's beloved to walk humbly with our God hand in hand.