

Year A – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – 29 January 2017  
 Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

A week ago Friday, many, many people gathered in front of a powerful man to listen to him preach his “good news” about where he feels called to lead his people and how he will make his nation great again.

This morning we have gathered here, side by side with Christians all around the world, listening to the words of a gentle man sharing with us his truth of how he expects his people to lead *with* him and how, together, we will all participate in bringing into being the Kingdom of God.

One of these men is a self-proclaimed “success story” who will “save” his nation. The other is a man, sent by God, who has already saved *every* nation.

So, my friends, to which man do we “lend our ears”? Do we follow the devices and desires of this world? Or do we invest our hope, our faith and our trust in God’s world? ...

This may seem like such an easy question to answer on a Sunday morning while our bums are firmly planted in our pews, but how much more difficult is it to answer on Monday morning when the stock markets open again and our investments have begun to soar or to sink? What about Tuesday afternoon when we begin to listen to the news about pipelines and immigrants, climate change and Brexit? Or Wednesday when our children call to celebrate that our grandchildren have been accepted into the university or college of their choice but how on earth will they handle the crippling student debt? Or Thursday when we go to buy our groceries and it is cheaper to buy fast food and Big 8 pop than it is to buy a loaf of bread, milk and vegetables? Where then will our loyalties lay? How much more difficult will it be to remember that we must place *all of our trust* in that man who spoke to the crowds, telling them:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are those who mourn ... Blessed are the meek ...*

*And who then went on to challenge all of us saying, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are the pure in heart ... Blessed are the peacemakers ... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake ... Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account ...*

When the week takes over and Church threatens to just become that thing we did last Sunday, where will our thoughts go then?

When I was young, which wasn’t really all that long ago, what was happening to the “south of us” or “across the pond” had impact but it seemed to take longer for that impact to strike home. Decisions made by others around the world were a call for consideration and were something to keep an eye on but the urgency that seems to be a part of our global village today was then not yet seen. Today is a different day. Our world has changed and there is no going back.

We cannot pretend that instant communication does not exist. If we choose not to “get connected” on the Internet or own a smartphone with Facebook and Twitter,

that doesn't exclude us from the ramifications of these inventions which have completely changed the face of the whole world. We can choose not to share in those contraptions but we cannot choose to ignore what these contraptions have contributed and how they influence the lives we live. Our world has changed and we can sit and lament or we can stand and proclaim. The choice is ours.

In the past week more has been said to ignite discussions, and passions, all over North America about immigrants, people with disabilities, women's rights, people whose "lifestyles" are "offensive", Muslims, Mexicans, civil rights, and on and on ... Yes, these decisions are being made by Americans for Americans, but we are seeing in our own Canadian political arenas the same sentiments being brought forward because it seems that the cultural climate has changed. No longer is 'political correctness' the catch phrase of the day. Now it seems to be popular to speak "the truth the people want spoken". So, the time has come for the people to speak. Who will speak for us? Who will speak for us as *Christians*? And what would we have them say?

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

The wisdom of our world today tells us that the economy is the most important thing and if it means that more and more people are pushed back, pushed out and left to fend for themselves, then so be it. The wisdom of the world tells us that we are to be scared to death of people we do not know. If they do not think the way we do then they are not just wrong, but they are a threat. ... "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

Where is the wisdom of God today? Who holds the wisdom that God has shared with those who believe and will follow the One He sent to be the leader that is to be followed; the man who truly does speak for the people – not just *some* of them, but *all* of them? That wisdom is found in every woman who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. That wisdom is found in every man who is merciful. That wisdom is found in every teenager who is pure in heart. That wisdom is found in every child of every age who strives to be a peacemaker. That wisdom is found right now in every person who is being persecuted for righteousness' sake and who is being reviled and persecuted because of their decision to follow Jesus in His Movement to save the world and bring about the Kingdom of God, rather than to follow a mere man in his movement to remake the world in his own image.

The wisdom of God is all around us but it is not loud, inflammatory, hurtful or divisive. It is quiet, reconciling, healing and gentle. It is all around us but it requires a choice and a lifelong effort if we are going to participate in it. God's wisdom is not just for those who are considered part of "us" versus "them". God's wisdom is for all.

So how do we participate in God's wisdom? How do we proclaim the true Gospel of God's love expressed in Jesus Christ himself?

There are two things we need to do: (1) we need to hold fast to, and hold up the True Gospel; and (2) we need to begin doing what the Lord requires, which is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

First, we need to grasp onto and hold up the True Gospel rather than allow ourselves to forget what exactly that Gospel is while sliding into an easier understanding that we could call the "Alternative gospel."

Over the past 15 or 20 years there has been a theological shift in some parts of the North American church world that has led to a new understanding of the gospel. It is a gospel of abundance that teaches first and foremost that 'God wants the best for you'. That in itself is not a wrong statement. Where this teaching goes off the rails is that it becomes about doing everything God's way simply so that *God will bless you*. Again, a simple thing that doesn't seem too odd but it is a very dangerous theology to grasp on to.

God tells us in many different ways that if we choose to live according to God's plan for our lives, being faithful to Him, praying for His wisdom and walking in His ways, we will receive blessings. The unstated truth of this relationship is that we choose to live God's way because God's ways *are the best ways*. Why would we choose to live apart from God? The blessings we receive are the incredible "side effects", so to speak, of living in relationship with God.

On the other hand, the new "gospel of abundance" teaches that in order to receive all of these bountiful blessings you have to fall into line in a relationship with God. It sounds like it's the same but it's not. The True Gospel is our honest response to living in a relationship with God through Christ simply because we want to be with God. The "alternative gospel" is all about choosing God for what He will give us. Instead of the emphasis being on God's love, the emphasis becomes on the believer's greed.

This past week we were introduced to the utterly ridiculous concept that there could be "alternative facts". Hogwash. Truth is truth. Anything alternative to the truth is not truth. The same goes for what we believe as Christians. The True Gospel is Jesus Christ. Period. The truth that leads us to Jesus Christ is the Gospel. Proclaiming belief in Jesus Christ that we might be led to greater riches, more success, heightened happiness is not the True Gospel. It is that fake "alternative gospel" which does not save souls. If we are to truly walk out of this place with integrity in faith, we must walk out of here proclaiming unabashedly the True Gospel that is quite simply Jesus Christ who is our Lord and Saviour and in whose love we have received and will always receive all that we will need and all that we truly desire – God's love, forgiveness of sins, everlasting life.

So, we need to hold fast and stand up and proclaim the True Gospel and we do that by doing exactly what we are told the Lord requires. As it is proclaimed in the prophet Micah: "What does the Lord require of (us) but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (our) God."

We are called to do justice. To do justice we must be a praying people. We must turn to God with our questions and concerns and then listen as the Lord of all Justice helps us to know how we should respond to every situation, remembering, of course,

that Jesus has already given us that foundation: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. In all circumstances, we shall do justice.

We are called to love kindness. If we live our lives with the intention of loving kindness we will not be capable of hate. We will not be capable of fearing those we don't know because we will be too busy reaching out in kindness and trying to get to know them, understanding what we have in common rather than fearing what we do not have in common. Loving kindness is an all-time-consuming action. It doesn't leave room for hate or fear or pushing aside.

We are called to walk humbly with our God. This is probably the biggest and most important expectation of the True Gospel of all. If we are walking with God constantly, then how could we be anything but humble? We best recognize our own humility when we are in the presence of One who is greater than we are. There is no one greater than God and there is no one more humble than Jesus Christ himself.

In so very many ways, true humility means that we live in such a way as that we instinctively put others before us. And is that not what Jesus himself did? In going to his death on the cross, he placed our well-being before his own. By breaking the bonds of death, he opened for us the Kingdom of Heaven, eternal life, inviting all of us to enter in. Jesus himself is standing, holding that door open for us. When we walk humbly with God, we are acting as Christians – little Christs.

If we uphold the True Gospel; if we live our lives doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, we will indeed change the world. We will affect the lives of millions, and millions and millions of those who will come after us. And we won't do it by pushing anyone to the outside or proclaiming that we are more worthy than others, or that others are not worthy at all. We will have a profound and life-changing impact because we faithfully pledged our loyalty and our lives – both temporal and eternal – to the One person who is truly worthy of leading us; the One person who is truly inviting us to follow him into the greatest nation that already exists – the Kingdom of God on earth. And that Kingdom is just waiting for all of us to take up residence and fulfill our responsibility as Christians.