

God's Takes a Side

A Sermon on Micah 6:1-8 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 by the Rev. Philip Major
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What is most important for us to do, as people of faith? What activities are most important, and which ones are less important for people who are trying to be faithful to God? The answers to these questions have been a source of contention for centuries for Christians, but also for Jews, for Muslims, and for people of other faiths. Each religious tradition has their own way of answering these questions.

In our tradition, we understand the New Testament and Hebrew Scripture to be the ultimate authority. For instance, we strive to love our enemies, not because it's the most helpful thing to do, and not because it's easy (it's not easy), but because that's what we find in Holy Scripture. The ideas given to us in scripture, and especially by Jesus, are the ultimate authority.

In our tradition, we also understand that we must bring our intelligence to bear in order to make sense of scripture. About four hundred years ago, a priest by the name of Richard Hooker, observed that Scripture is the ultimate authority for us, but there are some ideas in Scripture that are in conflict with one another. We cannot assume we can read Scripture and it will always make sense, with no further study or interpretation. Richard Hooker observed that there are passages of Scripture where the meaning of the passage is not immediately apparent. He said there is one thing required in addition to Scripture in order to be faithful. We must use our intelligence to understand scripture.

In our tradition, Holy Scripture and human intelligence work together in joyful partnership. This is not a partnership between equals. Human intelligence is not the main authority. Scripture is the ultimate authority, but scripture needs human intelligence in order for it to be understood.

So we bring our intelligence to bear as we try to understand what is most important for us, according to the Bible. Let's consider two of these passages of scripture, read this morning. In each of these passages, God's people are in conflict about what is most important. These passages give us clear guidance about what is most important for us to be faithful.

When we read the two letters we call First and Second Corinthians, we see that the people in the church in Corinth were having several serious arguments, but there was one fundamental issue for this congregation. The main disagreement was whether this whole thing about following Jesus is mostly an individual journey or mostly a communal journey. Is being a disciple of Jesus mostly about the way we treat each other and work together? Or is being a disciple of Jesus mostly about the work of us as individuals?

There was a group of people in this church who thought of themselves as 'The Super Christians'. I know this might come as a surprise to you, but there were some people in this church who thought they were superior, especially when it came to following Jesus. We learn there was this faction of members of the church who thought of themselves as 'Super Christians' when we put together all of the clues from these letters. This is what Richard Hooker was talking about when he said that Scripture needs a partner. Scripture needs human intelligence for understanding.

The 'Super Christians' thought they were the best, as individuals of course. These individuals knew they were the smartest. They were the best educated. The Super Christians had good jobs or they were so wealthy, they didn't have to work at all. Some of the Super Christians had special talents, like the ability to speak in tongues, or the ability to interpret what others were saying when they were speaking in tongues.

The Super Christians were very proud of themselves, and their individual accomplishments. They told everyone about their individual strengths and abilities. They boasted of their wisdom and their ability to read and write. For them, following Jesus was an individual pursuit.

As you can guess, not everyone in the church in Corinth thought these so called 'Super Christians' were so superior. Paul disagrees with the idea that following Jesus is about any one person's

individual gifts or accomplishments. Here at the opening of the letter Paul tells them. It's not about you and your wisdom and your special gifts.

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? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

The world did not come to know God's love through wisdom. The world came to know God's love through a person whose love for the people was so great, so broad, so high he was willing to give up everything for their sake. *For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Human power and human wisdom are often exercised in individualistic ways, for the sake of the individual. In our nation today we see people using their power in a very unChristian way, because they are using their power as power over others. The president of our nation has sent his paramilitary forces into our cities, using his power as power to dominate his opponents.

The power of God is the opposite of domination and selfishness. This is the main idea for our patron saint, St. Paul. *We proclaim Christ crucified.* The power of God is power that is not selfish. It's power that serves others. It's power that suffers for the sake of others. It's power that connects people, rather than separating them. The wisdom of God is wisdom for the sake of serving others, not for serving myself. The wisdom of God doesn't make me stronger as an individual, it makes my relationships with others stronger.

Two thousand years after Paul wrote this letter, it's surprising to me that many of the people who read First Corinthians have taken the side of the Super Christians in the argument. Many people who read First Corinthians think of faith as something that is about their individual relationship with God. They think faith is about increasing their power, even their power over other people.

In Paul's time and in our time, there is an argument between those who think faith is an individual pursuit and those who think faith is about the ways we treat each other. Let's remember, God takes a side in the argument.

The Hebrew Prophet, Micah, was also in the middle of a similar big argument about what is most important for people who are trying to be faithful. From today's passage we see that one group of people has been arguing that the sacrifices they bring to the Temple are most important. Micah disagrees.

Micah argues that more extravagant sacrifices are not the answer. Micah argues that faithfulness requires us to follow God's commands for us to care for the poor and the sick.

We see the argument play out in the last portion of today's passage. *Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old?* We can tell these offerings are not the solution, because the situation seems to be getting desperate. The next question suggests a much more significant offering. *Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?*

When we study the history of Micah's time, which was 700 years before the birth of Christ we learn why the questions are becoming more desperate. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, had been conquered by the Assyrians. The Temple still stands, but the city of Jerusalem is under threat from the Assyrians, and refugees from the north are flooding into Judah. One group of the religious people responds to the growing crisis by making the most outrageous suggestion: *Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

But offering more extravagant sacrifices is not the answer. For Micah and the other prophets of his time, the sacrifices brought to the Temple were not just unnecessary, they were distracting people from doing what God asked them to do. *He has told you, O mortal, 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?*

Micah exhorts the people to follow the covenant given to them by God. It was a covenant that required them to treat the foreigners among them as their own people. The covenant didn't say anything about bringing thousands of rams as a sacrifice to God.

You might have noticed that the argument among Paul's people and the argument among Micah's people had something in common. The Super Christians in Corinth had something in common with the people who planned to bring one thousand rams to the Temple as an offering. Both groups argued that faith relies on the actions of wealthy, powerful individuals. A poor person cannot bring a thousand rams as a sacrifice to the Temple. A poor person doesn't even have one ram to feed their family.

Paul and Micah take the opposing side in the argument. It's not about your special talents, about your ability to speak in tongues or about any individual ability. It's not about your ability to give an entire barn full of animals as a gift. The only important thing for people of faith is the way we treat each other. Paul and Micah say, 'Take those one thousand rams you were planning to offer as a sacrifice in the Temple and give them to one thousand families whose children don't have enough food.'

Christians argue among themselves about what is most important for us to be faithful. Our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers have the same kinds of arguments. Let's remember, God takes a side in our arguments. As Micah says, "The Lord has a controversy with his people."

When we read the Bible, when we bring our intelligence to bear, we learn which side God is taking. God does not take the side of the powerful, in their quest to dominate the weak. God takes the side of those who are grieving, not their oppressors. God takes the side of the homeless, not those who build mansions of gold. God takes the side of those who build trust and relationships, not those who separate children from their parents.

God takes a side in the argument. God takes the side of the poor. God takes the side of the sick. God takes the side of the refugees. God takes the side of those who show mercy to the person who has fallen. God takes the side of love.