

Sermon for 4 Epiphany
January 29, 2023
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

For most humans, no matter of gender identity, there are three basic questions for which we seek the answers:

1. Who am I?
2. What am I to do?
3. What must I do to fulfill my purpose?

For Christians, the third questions becomes:

What would God have me do?

Jesus says: “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 and thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

That’s very well and good, but how do you do that? What is the measure?
How do I love my neighbor as myself?
Let alone, loving God with all my heart and soul and mind?

The Psalm asks:

Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
who may abide upon your holy hill?

And there are no easy answers.

The Prophet Micah asks:

“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?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

What am I to do?

I want to figure this out.

We should be able to calculate and reason our way to quantify the answers.

If there’s any place where we should be able to answer those questions

it should be here.

After all, Los Alamos has the highest percentage of people with doctorate degrees in the nation, at **17.7 percent** – nearly twice the 9.5 percent reported by Tompkins County, N.Y., home of Cornell University.

But can intellect get us to what we want to know?

Paul doesn't think so:

“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?”

There's a story I remember from my days of wandering in the wilderness.

Once upon a time, there was a wise Zen master. People traveled from far away to seek his help. In return, he would teach them and show them the way to enlightenment.

On this particular day, a scholar came to visit the master for advice.

“I have come to ask you to teach me about Zen,” the scholar said.

Soon, it became obvious that the scholar was full of his own opinions and knowledge. He interrupted the master repeatedly with his own stories and failed to listen to what the master had to say. The master calmly suggested that they should have tea.

So the master poured his guest a cup.

The cup was filled, yet he kept pouring until the cup overflowed onto the table, onto the floor, and finally onto the scholar's robes.

The scholar cried *“Stop! The cup is full already. Can't you see?”*

“Exactly,” the Zen master replied with a smile.

“You are like this cup — so full of ideas that nothing more will fit in. Come back to me with an empty cup.”

If that doesn't resonate so much, we could delve into the Marvel Universe. Did any of you see the first Doctor Strange film?

It is the great surgeon's hands are irreparably injured in a traffic crash, and he is distraught until he meets a paraplegic whose spine was crushed but who is walking around.

He wants the secret, and is told to go to this one place to seek the one master who can teach him.

Of course, when he meets the master Dr. Strange cannot go beyond the physical limitations taught him by western medicine.

He must be shown the limits of his own knowledge to realize how much more there is to the universe than what he believes of what he can see, touch, hear and taste.

Dr. Strange was a man of massive ego. Confirmed in his own pride that he knew what was and what is and what is to come.

Then along comes Paul writing to the Church gathered at Corinth. “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world...” “Consider your own call...God chose what is foolish.”

You can imagine my reaction when I read that. Paul is saying that God called the Corinthians, and by extension each of us, precisely because we are not wise or powerful or nobly born but because we are foolish.

We are foolish to believe that a man, executed by crucifixion, cursed by his own people for having been hanged on a tree, was resurrected by God as the Savior of the World. That's not what the world teaches and requires.

The world says,*
Cursed are the poor in spirit, for they shall be spat upon!
Blessed are the strong, for they shall possess the earth.
Blessed are the powerful, for they shall be revered among men.
Blessed are the bold, for they shall be masters of the world.
Blessed are the victorious, for victory is the basis of right.
Blessed are the iron-handed, for the unfit shall flee before them.
Blessed are the valiant, for they shall obtain great treasure.

The world demands signs. The world demands success.
The world demands prideful.

But the world does not know.
“God chose what is low and despised in the world,
things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,
so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

Today's Gospel impels us to rise up against the world and defy
the expectation to dominate and rule.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

We asked at the beginning:
Who am I? What am I to do? What must I do to fulfill my purpose?

Jesus lays out a job description
for being a citizen in the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

Jesus begins with a phrase commonly understood in his day,
but not in ours, “poor in spirit.”

This means more than just poor, it carries the implication of “beggar.”
Just as a beggar cannot be self-sufficient by begging
so we, too, cannot be sufficient unto ourselves
unless we share in the reality of God in our lives.
We must acknowledge
our need for and dependency on God’s presence in our lives

Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is not for the proud,
but for those who confess their unworthiness before God.

Until we are willing to admit spiritual bankruptcy,
that the debt of our sin is far greater than we can ever repay,
we shall never come to Christ or become part of his kingdom.

To be poor in spirit is to be open and empty before God
to allow God’s Grace to fill us with his love.

So many words are spent begging to be told what must I do?
Bow down; Burn offerings; Forfeit my wealth; Sacrifice my firstborn.

“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.”

* Adapted from The Five Realms; <https://www.facebook.com/515908662282462/posts/blessed-are-the-strong-for-they-shall-possess-the-earth-cursed-are-the-weak-for-t/876472202892771/>