

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, January 29, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Living Our Belief”
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

two of our readings this week present us with a set of rather difficult challenges; the prophet Micah tells us that there are three things that the Lord requires of us: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God; and Jesus, in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, gives us a list of blessings, several of which stand largely in contrast to what we would normally consider as blessings or be likely to pray for as blessings we desire to receive: poverty, mourning, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking, and persecution

the thread that I see running through these readings is the challenge of living out our belief; now I wouldn't say that any of you are not living out your belief; and I recognize that it may sound a little strange for me to point out living out our belief as a difficult challenge; yet many people think that being a Christian is all about belief, is only about believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God; that certainly is very, very, important, (Paul refers to the importance of belief in our reading from 1st Corinthians today), but belief is not all there is to being a Christian; you can't just have belief if it doesn't lead you to do anything differently in your life; notice that neither of these passages says anything about belief; it is clear from these passages, and from many others, that the Bible consistently reminds us that our beliefs must have visible consequences in our daily life

going back to the Beatitudes; these blessings that Jesus holds up for us are not easy to explain; how is it that the meek will inherit the earth?; I'm not sure how that will happen, nor have I heard anyone who can give a good explanation of how it will; I find it more helpful to meditate and pray about this and all the other blessings, asking God for the insight to see how I might more fully exercised in my life each of these qualities listed; what would I have to do to become more merciful?; what would I have to do to become more pure in heart?; what would I have to do to become more of a peacemaker?--asking, of course, knowing that I can only begin to do these things with God's help

some people want to jump into the explanation that in the Beatitudes Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven, assuming that these blessings are not meant to be realized

here in this life on earth, but only after our death and in the reward of heaven; but notice that “heaven” is not capitalized in this passage, because the translators correctly understand it to be not a place that Jesus is talking about, in this instance (in other instances he is), somewhere distant from here, or a time that will only come in the future; no, what Jesus is talking about here by the term kingdom of heaven is a state of being, a way of living--one that is infused with God’s presence and God’s purpose; and the tense that Jesus uses both times it is mentioned is the present tense, not the future: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”; elsewhere in Matthew Jesus reminds us that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2, 4:17, 10:7), and in Luke, in just slightly different words, that “the kingdom of God is among you (17:21)”; we need to enact the qualities listed in the Beatitudes if our belief is to be life-changing for us and for the people around us; we need to enact the qualities listed in the Beatitudes if we want to live and move and have our being within the kingdom of heaven right now

going back to Micah, neither does he pin our requirements on belief; to “do justice,” we have to have some understanding of what is just and what is unjust; but that understanding is not sufficient if we do not do what is just in all of our undertakings; to “love kindness,” is not merely a warmness of the heart or a fondness for a certain way of looking at things; love in the biblical understanding is always an action word; for example in the Marriage vows a couple promises “to love ... until we are parted by death”; no one can promise how they are going to feel about their partner, or what emotions they will experience; feeling may go all over the map even during the course of the best of marriages; the vow to love is a promise to act in certain ways and refrain from acting in other ways; so in order to love kindness we have to be kind in all of our interactions with others; and finally to “walk humbly” with our God is, as I said about living with the Beatitudes in mind, a way of living that is infused with God’s presence and with God’s purpose; walking humbly with God is something we are to do throughout each and every day

our beliefs must lead us to patterns of commitment in our lives, with an ongoing series of actions and consequences over a long period of time; compare these examples: to believe in marriage means that you keep your wedding vows--day in, day out; to believe in health means that you lead a healthy lifestyle--day in, day out; to believe in our form of government means that you vote, pay taxes, observe laws, and participate in civic life--day in, day out; in any of these examples, you could have an abstract commitment to the idea of marriage, or health, or America, but if you don’t live out that belief, it won’t make any difference in your life or in

the lives of people around you; likewise, to believe in Jesus Christ means that you attend church, study the Bible, pray regularly, support ministries financially, participate in hands-on ministry, and act in ways consistent with God's desires--day in, day out

from what I've seen during my two months among you here at Christ and Grace is that many of you are already doing these kinds of things that our readings today have identified as living out our belief; the challenge I want to set for all of us--and I'm including myself in that challenge--is for us to keep on doing these activities, but to do them in an especially mindful and prayerful way; to do them in a way that recognizes that a simple and consistent pattern of Christian behavior in our lives is, in fact, nothing less than the experience of the kingdom of heaven, in our lifetime, right here on earth; the difficult challenge is for us all to keep this in mind in such a way that will transform our daily activities and daily interactions into a recognizable living out of our belief--everyone we know and with whom we come into contact with should be able to tell that we live a different kind of life because of our belief; the difficult challenge is for us all to keep this in mind in such a way that will transform our daily activities and daily interactions into living into the kingdom of heaven