

Epiphany V Sermon II by Bishop Michael Hawkins

What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

God, by his prophet Micah, puts forth his controversy or complaint with his chosen people. You get the sense that they have broken God's heart. You can hear the pain and disappointment in the divine plea: "O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me." God recalls to them his saving acts, and he wonders at their hard hearts. Despite all that he has done for them, they stubbornly go astray. As Christians we might know and feel the same conviction, in meditating on the cross. What Micah puts forth here is the helpful understanding that for the people of God, all sin is ingratitude.

The people of God, in this case, had so misunderstood and perverted the ritual law, that it and its practice had become

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abominable. There is a recognition, first and especially in the sacrifice of Isaac, that all ritual sacrifice is, in a sense, sacramental. We can give God nothing, but he provides us with the gifts whereby we acknowledge him and our need for him. But when this system of sacrifice is misunderstood, you get a perverse interpretation. “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” Or perhaps better, “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil?” And finally, to take this to its logical extreme, “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

When Judah regards the sacrificial system apart from the grace of God and the call to holiness, it becomes not just empty, but wicked and abominable. Amos makes the same point. I think that for us, there is a striking parallel problem in our

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reading from John. Jesus rebukes those who refuse to recognize the Scriptures' witness to him: "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me."

Micah did not call for the abolition of sacrifice according to the Old Testament, and Jesus was not telling his opposition to throw out their Bibles, their Scriptures. Yet, the danger is the same for us, and the traps that seduced them are before us as well. We, too, can divorce worship from living. We, too, can misconstrue the sacraments as human works of self-justification, as opposed to effectual signs of God's free and saving grace. We, too, can have the Scriptures, can open and read and search our Bibles, and yet never open our hearts to Jesus.

"What does the Lord require of thee?" It is a matter of the heart....there is in Micah's answer one phrase that I would

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highlight, for you to keep before you today and to pray about.

To love mercy. This is sometimes translated “to love kindness.”

In light of the Epistle for today, that is a welcome echo.

What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other, in Jesus Christ. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. And he commands us, Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Put on therefore, mercy and compassion, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, even as the Lord forgave you, so also do ye.