

First Lesson: Micah 6:1-8
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
The Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
February 2, 2020

“What Does the Lord Require of You?”
Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What does the Lord require of you? This was, of course, taken from the Micah text. I'm using it as a preaching point for our call to set a vision for our ministry for our congregation over the next 5 years, leading to our 50th anniversary in 2025. January 5, 2025 will be 50 years from the first worship, all those years ago. So, determining this vision is responding to God's call, "What does the Lord require?" I could use a little bit different language, which is what are we accountable for? Who are we accountable to? That simple answer is to God and the people of this community and out into the world. We are on a mission, and so what does the Lord require of you? These issues of justice and mercy and walking with God humbly are ways to shape our vision for the future. The Micah text speaks this phrase knowing the saving acts of the Lord from Shittim to Gilgal. I'm sometimes slightly embarrassed to teach word to the 7th grade confirmation students, but it's from one part to another. It's from the east side of the Jordan into the promised land in Canaan to Gilgal, where new covenants were brought forth. It basically describes God's history of righteousness. That's always the starting point. No matter what it is, is to remember God's character, God's commitment to our life, the good news of Jesus Christ. That's always the greatest way to figure out our accountability is to remember who God is. Not that you have to have an elevator speech, but perhaps you've heard that phrase that if you had 30 seconds in an elevator, could you describe God's grace upon your life to someone who needed to hear a word of hope? Thirty seconds isn't too long, but it's probably about 25 seconds longer than most Lutherans like. Jesus loves me is not a bad start but just recall what God has done in our congregation and in our own life. For those that are seeking hope and healing, our testimony brings forward to know the saving acts. It's interesting to be a Christian, especially a Lutheran Christian. We have solid theology. I think the Lord does require that of us, to have solid theology. So, the first lesson speaks what do I need to do. Do I need to sacrifice a calf? Or a thousand rams? Or ten thousand rivers of oil? Or my first born? Do I need to do this work to appear righteous? That's where it is so powerful. None of that works righteousness – by my efforts, trying to earn God's grace, God's love. Absolutely off track is God who loves to remember the saving acts of the Lord and God's character, and so to do justice is a reflection of God. To show loving-kindness is a reflection of God. And to walk humbly with God is the commitment we make, not on our own, but with the Lord.

The First Corinthians reading then speaks about signs and wisdom. Signs are proofs that show the power of God, and wisdom, of course, is things that make sense. It gets into that which is the cross can be extremely foolish. I was thinking of my first time to a worship service, and we were singing the song “This Is the Feast of Victory of Our God,” and you knew a little bit about the cross that Jesus died. How could that be? That does not make sense. He died, and we, as the people who know the whole story of the power of the Holy Spirit to resurrect, Jesus Christ and the commitment and promise of God to resurrect us is the proof and power of God’s love in the cross. That theology is called the theology of the cross. The challenge is, and Luther pointed that out, was the theology of glory is a way of describing God’s love, and God is worthy of glory. Beautiful creation, the marvelous work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, but we, as people of faith, can get off and forget about the power and wisdom of the cross, meaning where people are hurting is where God is calling us to be. Where people are hurting, this intersection point, not simply the death of Jesus Christ but total affinity of God in the midst of our grief, in the midst of our most difficult times, it is God breaking forth, the wisdom and power of the cross in our brokenness and in our suffering and in our death and in our failure, absolutely and actually experienced. To the very heart of darkness. So, what is required is courage to participate in the suffering of this world.

In a previous congregation, I befriended a couple that were methamphetamine users, and, if you know anything about that disease, I’d just say this: I love the people; I hate the drugs. And, they became an evangelizing force, because helped them out a little bit. Then, in their community, they shared the church here didn’t judge us; they’re trying to help us. All of a sudden, we had a lot of methamphetamine users. Now what was kind of funny to me was when somebody would come in and look kinda tough and rough, the normal church response was “Oh, Pastor . . . He’s one of yours.” That’s true. There’s a part where pastors have to step up and step out and lead on this. When we think about the tough issues of our congregation and the tough issues of our community, it’s just what does the Lord require, it’s no more than this, which is to show kindness and to be humble and to seek justice and compassion for those who are suffering. Luther said it this way, the theology of the cross calls the thing what it really is, and, so, Lutherans have had that great response. Why were there hospitals? Why were there agencies, institutions getting involved with very difficult things? It was because we didn’t hide behind being nice. We knew that this was hurting and suffering and we needed to be called to it.

So, I ask a blessing upon our congregation that we can step forward for people who are hurting, and the Gospel text shares some insights. So where people are poor in spirit, we are called to bring forward the good news of God’s love, the kingdom of God. For people who are mourning, we are called to comfort. For people who are mild, but not because of anything more than struggling to find their way, we bring the joys of inheriting this earth through the faith of Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be filled. That is our opportunity to proclaim the love of God in word and deed. Then it shifts in the text to blessed are those who show mercy, because we will receive it. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are peacemakers. I was thinking about that. That might be just enough to go after. This congregation has known as a place that extends and shares peace. The Wednesday Night Alive team is taking a look at next year's programs. They are always so diligent and so faithful in being organized and we were wondering when the right time would be to have the gala, the kickoff for the 2020-2021 season. In taking a look at the calendar, I suggested this – the day after the election. We need some good news – right? Now I don't mean to project what's going to be, but, obviously, we live in such a divisive time. We, as people of faith, are called for with solid theology to be able to seek and do justice, to love kindness, and to be humble in working with and for the needs and pursuits of others. So, I just love, as I learn about our community - I was down with Jack Lacy, learning more about the Community Assistance Network here in Sun City called CAN, all the wonderful things they are doing. This congregation would have such a vital connection to the areas where life is difficult that if I asked this question to someone, they'd be able to respond. What difference does American Lutheran Church play in your life and in the life of this community? It's a really challenging question, and it's one that we should seek to be able to articulate and to listen to our community and to the needs and be able to proclaim the love of God that emanates from our center core. Basically, talking the talk and walking the walk is what we are going to be about. Another way to reverse that question is to say it like this. If we were gone, would you miss us? It's not meant to do anything more than this – to help hone our vision of where God is calling us, not out of a sense of trying to earn God's love but out of this amazing love that God is with us, especially in the midst of what others would consider too lost, too broken, needs to be forgotten. That is where we are called forward.

We are accountable to God. We are accountable to our community in which we serve, and we are accountable together. What does the Lord require except to seek the loving nature of God, justice, and kindness and walking in solidarity with others? So, I pray that this word called covenant - what does the Lord require? It is nothing more and nothing less than this: to know and share the saving acts of Jesus Christ. What does the Lord require? This is the Lord who gave everything for us, and that affirmation is simply so beautiful. I love how God is opening up the Scriptures for us, and I pray that for your own life that, knowing the savings acts of the Lord, whether you have that rehearsed or whether you have that open to share with others, is powerful testimony to the generations beneath us. To be able to part of a community of faith is a tremendous gift. I ask that our accountability energizes us, not out of guilt or shame, but out of absolute privilege. To share the loving acts of Jesus Christ. Amen.