

True Worship, True Mission

Micah 6: 1-8

Matthew 10: 5-10

Two weeks ago, the sermon considered the story of David's ambition to build a residence for God, and his palace prophet Nathan's encouragement, which resulted in Nathan getting a chastising visit from God in a dream. The outcome was a lesson in how God has an agenda, and it didn't include David building a temple. God had other things that David needed to do. Building a temple for God is nowhere in the range of priorities.

By the end of the sermon, we saw that Jesus never said to build *any* church building. This is rather disturbing since churches are known by their locations, their buildings, their architecture. It seems pretty strange that a place like Marion County with over 650 houses of worship probably has about 600 church buildings and who knows how many hundreds of acres of land, not to mention the hundreds of millions of dollars in real estate values. Jesus must have gotten something wrong, right? Or we did.

Church buildings mostly define the identity of a congregation. That's why a church's sanctuary is typically the image on their ads, on the cover of their pictorial directory, and the cover of their bulletin (if they have one anymore). That very reason is why we **don't** have the image on the cover of our bulletin any longer, but check our website, and there it is, a picture of the church.

We re-learned the lesson that a church is a ministry, a witness to the good news of new life, not a building. In passages from Mark two weeks ago, we learned that this ministry consisted of teaching, compassion, and healing. I think that message helped recalibrate our spirits to what we really knew to be the true nature of the Jesus' mission; ministry, not a church building.

Today, we come back to this theme, the church building, and confront something about which we may not be so sanguine.

What is it that these church buildings get used for? If you guessed worship, you would be brilliant, having thought the same thought as your brilliant pastor. The first stage of building is the sanctuary, again establishing the physical identity, centered on worship as the primary activity. *Before* building, the congregation has been gathering primarily for worship, and measures its health by the number of people participating in its worship. So it's worship, worship, worship!

Now let's check this and ask how often Jesus said, "You must attend worship services at synagogue?" Never.

How often did he exhort his 12 disciples to preach sermons, sing, and tell the people to worship? Never.

We have plenty of places where the idea of praising God and giving glory to God is taken up quite passionately. But if you think about it, it doesn't necessarily mean gathering in a building and doing something like worship. It is what **we want** it to be, and the reason we want it to be so is because that's what **we** do. That's rather self-serving. What we do is praise

and glorify God in worship, assuming that God wants us praising and glorifying. Micah says, think again. Ask Jesus; the answer isn't too positive either.

Someone is now probably asking in their brilliant minds, "Hey Pastor, what about that Matthew passage that says, *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*? Sorry to burst your bubble, but this passage, often used to justify particularly small group worship, actually has **nothing** to do with worship. In context, this verse is about forgiveness, reconciliation, and kingdom justice. You want to know what "two or three gathered in my name" looks like? Check the bulletin cover.

So the question is, *What is true worship?*

Let's start with the passage from the prophet Micah. Here in my very favorite passage. The prophet gives an account of the Lord God pleading his case against Israel. By his prophet Micah, God recounts their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, how Balaam's curse became a blessing, and how they were brought to the Promised Land. With Micah, God asks how his people can be so sinful and disobedient when God has provided them with such rich blessings.

A speaker for Israel asks how gigantic the offering must be to satisfy the Lord God: *with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?* That was pouring it on pretty thick, which I'm sure really ticked off God. But the speaker isn't smart enough to quit, but has to exceed his first effrontery with an even greater affront. Really pushing it, recalling the deaths of the first-born in Egypt at Passover, the speaker asks, *Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?* He's so unbelievably insolent, this jerk is lucky to be left standing. If I was God, I'd have turned him into a cockroach, which is a good reason why I'm not God.

Micah responds directly: *[The Lord God] has told you what is good, O mortal; and what does the Lord **require** of you but to do **justice**, to love **mercy**, and to **walk humbly** with your God.* To seek justice in an unjust world, to love mercy in a world of condemnation and judgment, and to walk humbly with your God who alone graciously gives and sustains life, providing its blessings.

Micah denies ritual-centered religiosity, the false piety that orients itself to acts of worship in the sanctuary while being devoted to acts of sinfulness outside of it. For Micah, you cannot claim to walk in the light of God during worship and then abide in devotion to the darkness of sin, expecting that God is somehow pleased. Micah makes it clear and simple that God expects his people to be devoted to what God is devoted, and to be faithful to God as God is faithful to them. They are to walk a different path, bringing light into darkness, not making their home in darkness.

Notice also the activity that Micah describes. It is **not** the temple ritual of sacrifice, diet, social boundaries, prayers, observing holy days, or anything else that a typical Jew in Israel would regard as having primary importance in religious life. Micah describes **doing** justice, **loving** mercy, and **walking humbly** with your God. God expects his faithful to pursue these activities, not all of the hollow, head-scratching, mumbo-jumbo religious busy-work. Certainly not *thousands of rams* or *ten thousand rivers of oil*, but **doing** justice, **loving** mercy, and **walking humbly** with your God.

Okay, that's fine for Micah, but what about Jesus? Isn't it remarkable that Jesus and his disciples and their ministry together is hardly ever mentioned as occurring in worship, whether in a temple shrine or a synagogue? Here's a tidbit of heresy for you; the gospel writers didn't seem to believe that Jesus' worship activity was so important that it needed to be mentioned.

Consider what happens in Matthew as Jesus takes the training wheels off his disciples and sends them into the mission field – note: **not** into the sanctuary. I know; he actually told them to go *do* something.

The first instruction is to avoid the Gentiles and Samaritans which sounds odd, but stylistically it connects with the Great Commission that ends the gospel of Matthew where Jesus expands the outreach to: *Go therefore and make disciples of **all** nations*. We get to see Jesus' understanding of the mission field change and grow from a narrow perspective to a worldwide ministry.

Then, he tells them to *preach repentance* for the end is near, *heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give*. That's quite a tall set of orders, Jesus. Couldn't we just write a check? How about a few prayers? Pretty much, Jesus says to go out, with your faith and spiritual power, and do one miracle after another. Don't stop doing miracles. Don't charge anyone for miracles because that's what weenies do.

The next question in the minds of the disciples (or the listeners of the gospel) is, how do you accomplish these miracles? Magic wand. Book of incantations. Special potions. A few courses from Hogwarts. Actually, none of these are going to help. In fact, let's make this very clear; there is **nothing** you are to bring along besides your faith and your devoted spirit. Okay, don't go naked – wear tunic and sandals, but don't bring any extra ones. No travel bag, no toiletries, no money, no credit cards, no hair dryer, no big stick.

The instructions remain; go and do miracles. Not tricks. Miracles. Don't go to the synagogue and worship. Go and do miracles, lots and lots of miracles. All you need is a fearless faith in the power of God working in you.

Think that's a crazy set of instructions? Well, it applies to us, to *preach* a new way because the old way is terminal, *heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean* and make them welcome before God, *drive out demons* and other scary wacky stuff, the very stuff that prevents us from building the community and equity that God has always expected us to produce. That's the kingdom, not the church building, not the worship service.

“Oh, Bruce; that's crazy stuff. Bruce is always preaching crazy stuff. He's so ridiculous. When are we going to get a real preacher instead of this reject? And when is he going to stop having public conversations with the voices in his head? He's very disturbing.”

You may have read about the FreeD.O.M. Health Clinic that came to Ocala for about a week, starting two weeks ago. They treated over 3,000 local people and estimated that they turned away hundreds more. We should be asking what's wrong with this picture, but the newspaper article, rightly in one sense, focused its praise on the volunteer physicians and staff. We should be asking, why?

Not mentioned in the article is that these people have not received care primarily because they're poor adults, can't afford health insurance, and don't qualify for Medicaid. Adults with no children simply don't qualify for Medicaid, period. A family of four can only make about \$8500 per year. If they make more than that, they don't qualify for Medicaid either. How can life work on those terms? It doesn't.

The conditions they have are often quite treatable, but without regular and sustained treatment, they aren't going to fare well for long. Emergency room care can't provide it. Cancer comes back. Kidney disease requires very expensive dialysis treatments. Diabetes requires medication and funds to buy food for a manageable diet. The bottom line is, people are dying.

So, the miracle for these people isn't treatment. Nothing is really miraculous about treatment; it happens all the time. Is there no money? This is the richest nation in the world. Don't tell me there isn't any money. That's obviously a lie. Getting billions turns out to be a simple legislative action. That's no miracle either, except in a state like ours where ideology trumps compassion all the time.

Heal the sick; that's these folks. Raise the dead; that's these neighbors. Cleanse the unclean (like lepers) and welcome them; that's these people – rejected by society as the expendable ones, the ones who we can let die while we balance the budget. Drive out demons; that isn't these folks, but obviously there is something **demonic in our system** that says they're expendable. You'll probably find the demons stalking the hallways of many state capitols. That's where the problem is. So, what's the miracle?

The miracle is ... **compassion**. It isn't a medical breakthrough. It isn't money. It certainly isn't an ideology. There isn't anything to prevent this healing, cleansing, dead-raising, demon exorcising *except compassion*. Apply **compassion** and you have a **major miracle!** Put some **compassion** on this ugly wound in our social fabric and you will take this miracle and multiply it into *lots* and *lots* and *lots* of miracles because there are millions of people – one million people in Florida alone – whom we as a society have decided are medically expendable. They can die and it's okay. **Compassion** is all it takes to start the miracle train.

Not only are we supposed to **do** something in the church, not simply (not even primarily!) attend worship services; we're called to perform miracles. Miracles aren't easy, of course, otherwise they wouldn't be miracles. Jesus' words are addressed to us, but Jesus is out there, waiting.