

I wasn't with you last week when you were forced into an online-only worship experience. I understand that Ken Vogt and Elizabeth Leung did a wonderful job of engaging those of you who were able to attend, despite the challenges. Thanks to the church leaders who helped make the pivot to going online – and apologies to those who didn't get the word about it. I hope too many of you weren't inconvenienced.

I wasn't with you because I was attending worship at the Southern Lights Conference in St. Simons, GA. I learned of this conference from some of the pastors with whom I gather for weekly bible study and *koinonia* – that is, small “c” communion. By one name or another, this conference has been going on for over 25 years. It is best summed up by one of the conference's co-hosts, theologian and author, Brian McLaren. He explains ([here](#)):

The American South is, in many ways, the epicenter of the White Christian Nationalism that is trying to dominate the nation and distort the faith. Many people are unaware of how many committed, sincere, and joyful Christians in the South stand strong for a different, deeper, wiser, and more compassionate understanding of Christian faith. We are rooted in the deep historic tradition of Christian contemplatives and activists from Jesus, Mary, Paul, John, and James to the desert sages, from St. Patrick and St. Columba to St. Francis and Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila ... from Howard Thurman and Dr. King and Mother Teresa and Pope Francis to amazing spiritual leaders today.

Southern Lights is one of the primary ways forward-leaning, compassion-based, contemplative and activist Christians across the South (and beyond) gather for mutual support, encouragement, learning, and inspiration.

Before attending, I thought the “Southern” in Southern Lights mainly addressed the location of the conference. I hadn’t understood how vital it was to have this safe place for “forward-leaning, compassion-based” Southern people of Christian faith. On the opening day, they asked for a show of hands from where people had come. Yes, the majority were from the South. But there were plenty of folks from the East Coast, Midwest, Central States, and some from the Mountain West. Myself being a “forward-leaning, compassion-based, contemplative” formerly from the South, it was a bit of a homecoming, and was definitely welcome company to be in.

The theme of this year’s conference was, *Wisdom From the Edge, When the Center Can Not Hold*. As McLaren explains,

For many of us raised in the cultural center—shaped by privilege, security, and the stability of institutions—it once seemed unthinkable that the moral and societal frameworks we trusted could fracture. But for those raised on the margins—where life was harder, systems less reliable, and injustice more visible—the cracks have long been evident.

This year at Southern Lights, we will gather with open hearts and open eyes, seeking wisdom from outside the cultural mainstream. We will hear from Black voices, Jewish voices, queer voices—each carrying hard-earned truths and sacred insights. In their stories, we’ll discover a throughline:

many of our greatest prophets, reformers, and visionaries were themselves born on the margins. (ibid, italics added)

McLaren's words lead us perfectly into the scriptures provided to us by the lectionary: a prophet and a messiah, each explaining to their audience what God requires in order for the kin-dom of God to be present.

In Micah,

God's opening statement (verses 3–5) appeals not to punishment but to memory: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” (verse 3). God reminds Israel of divine acts of deliverance—rescue from Egypt; leadership through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; and protection against the schemes of Balak and Balaam. These acts are not distant history; they are collective memories meant to form moral consciousness. Divine memory here functions as resistance to historical amnesia, which allows cycles of oppression to persist.

... Micah calls the community to remember not for nostalgia's sake but to reanimate a collective identity grounded in liberation history.

(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-micah-61-8-6>)

The prophet's words are a clearcut reminder to the people of God – and this might hurt our sensitivities – that God really doesn't care about their worship habits; their personal acts of piety. No, what God really cares about is how they put their faith into practice. And it is not just God's *desire*, it is a list of the

Requirements of Faith given by the Holy One. Notice how the prophet boils it down (Micah 6:8):

(God) has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does *Adonai* require of you
but to do justice
and to love kindness
and to walk humbly *with* your God.

What God calls faithful people to do, is to live their lives by this moral code. And to express these ethics in the context of community. All of the biblical witness addresses the behavior of faithful people in the midst of others. I could quietly live my life in a way that I believe is righteous and faithful to the gospel. But if the world around me is a mess, I am called to help others find their way to (back to) the desires and requirements that God has for the world. Meanwhile doing this work with great humility knowing the extent of our fallibility – we are only as strong as our acceptance of the grace and mercy of God.

Jesus conveys this message in his Sermon on the Mount offered in Matthew chapter 5. This is the outset of Jesus' ministry. In chapter four we read that Jesus is tempted by the powers of this world and overcomes them. Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls four disciples - Peter, Andrew, James and John. Then in three verses to conclude the chapter, Jesus teaches, cures, exorcises demons, and becomes well-known across the region – even “beyond the Jordan.” Crowds are coming to see him.

Chapter 5 opens up saying, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” It's unclear if Jesus

begins teaching to the four disciples or to the crowd. Regardless, by this being broadcast by Matthew, the words are available to anyone who has eyes to read, ears to hear, and a heart to absorb them.

In today's reading we are given the opening salvo of the "Sermon." These verses are traditionally known as "The Beatitudes" - *beatitude* being the Latin version of the Greek word for "blessed, happy, or happier." The nine blessings, given on a mountain, are parallel to the 10 "Words" Moses received on Mt. Sinai. As Pat pointed out in bible study, while the Ten Commandments came across as "rules," the Beatitudes are guideposts of thinking. I would add that they are the building blocks of the kingdom of God. Jesus offers these words in deliberate and stark opposition to the Empire of the Romans. While the Romans ruled with iron and cruelty, Jesus was turning the world upside down, by claiming that the kingdom of God was inhabited by:

- the poor in spirit;
- those who mourn;
- the meek;
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

(Echoing Micah)

DO JUSTICE

The kingdom of God is also inhabited by:

- the merciful;
- the pure in heart;
- the peacemakers;
- those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

LOVE KINDNESS

And, blessed are you, when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.

Friends, there is a standard by which we are REQUIRED to live. It is laid out by no less than the one we claim to be our Sovereign and our Savior. Jesus calls us to look at the world in which we live and make choices based on these values that construct the Realm of God.

An old college and seminary classmate of mine is a first generation American; his parents moved from India for his father to pursue ministry in the US. Anil Oomman is in the midst of a six-month sabbatical in his family's place of origin, Kerala, in the southwestern tip of India. The people of Kerala descend from the tradition of Jesus' disciple, Thomas, who purportedly sailed there and established a community of Christ.

Anil is observing the turmoil of his home nation from the perspective of those in Kerala. For anyone interested in reading him, you can find him on substack under the title of The Accidental Academic. (<https://theaccidentalacademic.substack.com?r=3uuser>)

In the aftermath of the murders of Nicole Good and Alex Pretti, Anil resonates with Jesus' words from mountain:

Alex Pretti moved toward harm, not away from it. He placed his body between those being hurt and those doing the hurting. There is a word for that in the Christian tradition I grew up in—not heroism, not disorder, but discipleship. Whatever else one believes about law, order, or borders, this is

the dissonance I cannot escape: the figure Christians claim to follow consistently moved toward the vulnerable, not the armed; toward interruption, not escalation; toward restraint, not domination. That this pattern of action is now named terrorism should give pause to anyone still insisting that Christian nationalism has anything to do with Jesus.

To place the words of the prophet Micah in real time, in the current moment, Anil writes,

It matters to me that this is not the whole religious story. Across the country, faith leaders have shown up—quietly, steadily—to accompany immigrant neighbors, to open sanctuaries, to place their bodies between agents and families, to bear witness. This has not been the work of one tradition alone. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists, and Indigenous faith leaders have trained together, marched together, and stood in the streets together.... In a moment when Christianity is so often invoked to bless force, this kind of multi-faith presence feels less like protest than fidelity—an insistence that the Spirit does not belong to any one tradition, and that it refuses the script being written in God’s name. (emphasis added. [Alex, Kerala, and the Unevenness of Belonging](#))

Many people are asking how they can meet the requirements of faith in this present crisis. Each of us needs to pray about that and arrive at our own discernment. None of us alone can turn the world around into the vision of the world God proclaimed through Jesus. But let’s be reminded that we were never meant to do it on our own. Whether it began with four fishermen, or a crowd of

radicalized followers made whole by Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, our discernment and our fidelity to the gospel is meant to be done together and with others. And, my friends, we are part of a generous and grace-filled community in which to practice our active faith. Whether online or in the pews, I believe you are surrounded by honest people who want to fulfill the requirements of faith. That is my understanding of the witness of Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church!



Check this out. Yesterday, Colleen sent me a social media post by a guest of one of the groups that uses our buildings. The guest took a picture of the “Be The Church” banner on the corner of the building and wrote: “If I ever feel the need for church again, I’m his, [sic] This(?) is the type I might venture to attend. One that actually practiced its tenets.”

When we live out the requirements of faith, it will be noticed by others, and not only will we affect the world with the gospel, we will also attract others.

And now Jesus calls us to be guests at this table. The place where the Savior of the world gathers disciples and offers “a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35) Throughout time followers of Jesus have returned to the table to be fortified in that promise, where Jesus breaks bread and our eyes are opened to God’s power through the resurrected Christ.

So let us gather there - yes, as the spiritual leads us, *on our knees* in humility - but prepared to rise up and face the powers and principalities of the world with courage and confidence ... all of it powered by love.