

Fourth Sunday After The Epiphany – Elizabeth Ahern

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? says Psalm 15. Have you ever asked yourself those questions? *LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?* The Message puts it this way: *God, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list?* In other words, who gets to be with God and in His divine presence?

When I was very young, I overheard my two much older teenage brothers talking about my Sunday school teacher. His name was Nieves de la Garza and we all called him Nievitos. He was an unmarried middle-aged man and my father's cousin. Nievitos was a man devoted to God with a very sweet spirit and a gift for working with kids. My brothers were laughingly saying, "He is the type that when he goes fishing, he fishes without bait because he does not want to trick or fool the fish." I don't know if this account is true, but the point is that it was meant to describe the type of righteousness that exemplified this man. Even to the point of what appears foolishness to those coming of age and waking up to the wisdom of the world.

In these shady and troubling times in our political climate that permeates the rest of our existence, it is wise to turn to the Bible for clues and discernment as to who is a true disciple. What are the behaviors that characterize a good person—the type of person that can be in God's divine presence?

Psalm 15:2-5 gives it to us pretty straight.

1. WALK STRAIGHT

Certainly a figure of speech here meaning a morally righteous person—honest and law abiding.

2. ACT RIGHT

We do not have to be psychologists to recognize bad human behavior. From the time we are young, we depend on the adults around us to teach us to do what is right. Some of us are very sneaky, but I have a feeling that micro-aggressions and passive-aggressive behaviors are not acceptable. Neither are bullying, taunting, provoking, mocking, teasing, spitefulness, meanness, nastiness and all kinds of attitudes that I cannot even begin to describe; but you know that it is bad and malicious behavior when you see it or experience it—especially if you can recognize its intent.

There are so many variables in behaviors because of the human condition and because we humans are so complex. There are some verbal and some nonverbal forms of communicating as well, all of which can be uniquely expressed according to gender and culture and to various degrees in meaning. Women and men have developed sophisticated forms of communication that sometimes

consists of snorts, sniffs, grunts, sneers, jeers, all kinds of facial expressions and body movements.

Let me show you some examples: turning the face fast away from a person (to signal rejection); looking up and down at someone (implying “Who do you think you are?”); or opening the shoulders wide like a butterfly (signaling, “I am better than you, or I am more powerful than you”).

Sometimes people just behave in inconsistent and irrational ways. It has taken me a long time to figure out that irrational behaviors usually come from not feeling safe, not feeling loved or not feeling like we belong (all three basic human needs). In this age of abundant leaders with narcissistic personalities, we now know that the need to self-aggrandize comes from a need to cover up some deep-rooted shame.

3. TELL THE TRUTH

Don't lie; speak what is fact and real with as much accuracy as possible. I know, some of us are very imaginative and pretty good storytellers. We still have to tell the truth.

4. DON'T HURT YOUR FRIEND

Don't be a “frenemy”. Where I come from we have a saying in Spanish, “con amigos como tu, para que quiero enemigas”—“With friends like you, I don't really need any enemies.” In other words, you are not a friend; you are actually in the category of enemy if you hurt your friend. Don't be like Judas.

Did you know that slaughterhouses often train one single sheep or one single goat to lead the other sheep to be slaughtered? It is called the Judas Sheep or Judas Goat. This Judas would pretend and act as though it is one of them, and then escape right when the unsuspecting sheep are near to their death destination.

5. DON'T BLAME YOUR NEIGHBOR

Oh, wouldn't it be nice if we did not have to take responsibility for anything we did wrong. If we could only point the finger at someone else, blame it on the neighbor, blame it on the other, the conquistadores and never ever have to feel the pain of guilt or regret for what we did wrong. I have heard recently that many Americans have lost the ability to feel pain; by doing so, we cheat ourselves because we don't grow into spiritually mature adults. We'd much rather inflict pain than to feel it.

Mark Twain once said that the reason we are asked to love our neighbors and to pray for our enemies is because they are generally the same.

6. DESPISE THE DESPICABLE

Who or what is wicked and disgraceful? Don't get cozy with it! It is okay not liking it. In fact, we should not.

7. KEEP YOUR WORD EVEN WHEN IT COSTS YOU

What sacrifices have you made to keep your word? For many here, it may be going beyond what is expected. The giving up of a more lucrative job, the extension of your service to accommodate organizational goals, the time, talent and treasure given to support a worthy cause.

8. MAKE AN HONEST LIVING

I don't think we have any former mobsters, crooks or thieves among us, but I have been in congregations where there were folks with this type of past.

9. NEVER TAKE A BRIBE

Never give a bribe.

According to the psalmist, you will not be thought of as someone who should be avoided and as someone who cannot be trusted if you live according to these nine principles; plus it obviously pleases God.

Okay, if you feel like this list is too much and too hard—I hear you. However, do consider the poor prophets that from time to time had to come forth. Prophets did not necessarily appear to forecast the future, as is often believed. Their job was to bring the people back to God when they had wandered away from God's path. With Israel, it happened regularly. I feel bad for the prophets, because I don't think that they were the ones having fun—they may have wanted to spend their time with family and friends, and catching up on the latest, or posting on social media.

They had a calling and they were usually hated for it and often killed. They were just no fun. They were party poopers at times and they often carried the weight of the sins of a community—even foreign ones. No wonder Jonas was a reluctant prophet. Never mind the ones that did not respond to their calling—ever. Seeing what was happening around them and then having to have the burden to communicate, with a likely hostile audience—when they were not walking straight, not acting right, when they were being deceitful, betraying friends, maliciously picking on a neighbor, being too comfortable with the wicked and with corruption, not keeping their promises, making a living by exploiting others, and giving and/or getting bribes.

In the eighth century BC, the prophet Micah saw what God had done for the people of Israel and how they drifted away from God by their actions—mistreating the poor mainly. To appease God, Micah asks HIM what kind of sacrifice would make up or cover up the sins—as if anyone can pay their way into God's divine presence. He asks: *With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

And God replied to Micah, *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Or, God has made it very plain and simple how to live, what to do, what God*

is looking for in men and women. Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously (The Message).

Yes, it is possible. Though we may have a million excuses for why we don't make it into God's presence: our background and upbringing, genetics and personality, our class and status, our values or lack of them, our affiliations, our neighbors, our possessions, the Super Bowl, our church, etc. In today's scripture, Paul affirms us that regardless of who we were, in Christ we have both the miracle and the wisdom of God—even if it may appear foolish.

I recently heard an interview on NPR with Bryan Stevenson, a human rights lawyer and founder of The Equal Justice Initiative. He is the author of a book called Just Mercy, made into a movie recently. Stevenson is passionate about justice and a couple of years ago led the creation of two cultural sites: the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. These institutions chronicle the legacy of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation, and the connection to mass incarceration and contemporary issues of racial bias.

The Memorial for Peace and Justice, located in Alabama, has a practice that involves the collection of dirt in a small jar from a lynching site and then bringing the jar back as a memorial. As part of this practice, an African American woman went to pay respects to one black man that had been lynched. As this woman was collecting dirt, a white man approached her and asked her, "What are you doing?" The woman was very scared and could have said, "I am just getting some dirt for my garden," or "Mind your own business." She chose kindness and truth instead, and told the man that she was paying respects to a black man that had been lynched there. To her surprise, the man asked if he could help. She said, "Sure." Soon the man started crying—and the woman was crying too, but the man was crying harder, so she felt concerned for him and caringly asked him if he was okay. The man said, "I am just afraid that my grandparents may have been responsible for this." They both cried and comforted each other over their loss. I imagine that in their sincere brokenness, they both felt liberated—they can both be called BLESSED.