

Blessed to Be a Blessing
Micah 6:1-4, 6-8
Matthew 5:1-12
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We have something very special to talk about today. It's the love affair that God has with us. The bible is a great big stack of love letters from God to us and from us to God. We put those love letters in a special place and keep them for generations. They are such wonderful letters that we read them over and over again.

So you're thinking—how can she say that the bible is a bunch of love letters? The bible has all those wars and angry words in it. Well, yes, it does, when God is upset with us. Sure, there was the flood when humanity wouldn't listen. But what God wanted all along was to be together. God wanted to be "in a relationship," as we say on Facebook. God wants a committed relationship, in fact. We call it a covenant.

God declared that covenant to Abraham with the words: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:2). God wasn't talking about "making America great again" or "making America first." God was talking about making the Israelite nation of people great, God's own people, whom God loved and created to be a blessing. When God says, "I will bless you," it's like saying, "I love you. You are everything I ever wanted." This is the kind of love letter you don't throw away.

Some of you aren't even old enough to have any love letters because today's emails and texts just aren't the same as old-fashioned, hand-written love letters. It's hard to be very romantic in a voice mail message, either. You want to choose your words carefully in a love letter; you want to read the words out loud and see how they sound before you fold the letter up and put it in the envelope. You want to hold it in your hands a minute before you seal it shut and send it off.

The Psalms are our letters to God—many of them love letters. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God (42:1). Do you hear the yearning? The desire? In any relationship, sometimes a couple is close and sometimes distant. Sometimes a love letter can bring a couple together again after a time of hurt or falling out.

We usually interpret today's scripture from Micah as a call to social justice. But if we read the passage as a love letter from God, we can hear it as God's desire to make up. God asks, "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?" God is asking, "What went wrong?" "Why did you tire of me?" God goes on to say, "Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." It's like saying, "I thought I did everything for you—I made you free and gave you leaders and helpers...I wanted all the best for you." God is pleading to restore the loving relationship. God wants to reconnect.

And then we, the people, answer, "What am I supposed to do? How can I make up to you? Do I need to bow down, or give gifts, or sacrifice something dear to me?"—"thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil"? This is love poetry! "Just tell me! I will gladly give you all I have and more!"

Then the Prophet Micah says, "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?" That's all. That's all God wants you to do—to do good, to be kind, and to stay in love with God, to be together in relationship. That's what it's all about.

Some of you may have seen "Jesus Christ Superstar" at the Bankhead in the last week or two. Mary Magdalene conveys her confusion: "What's it all about?" She sings,

I don't know how to love him
 What to do, how to move him
 I've been changed, yes really changed
 In these past few days
 When I've seen myself
 I seem like someone else
 I don't know how to take this
 I don't see why he moves me
 He's a man
 He's just a man
 And I've had so many
 Men before
 In very many ways
 He's just one more
 Should I bring him down
 Should I scream and shout
 Should I speak of love
 Let my feelings out?
 I never thought I'd come to this
 What's it all about?

....

Yet
 If he said he loved me
 I'd be lost
 I'd be frightened
 I couldn't cope
 Just couldn't cope
 I'd turn my head
 I'd back away
 I wouldn't want to know
 He scares me so
 I want him so
 I love him so

Songwriters PIPERNO, MARIO / FERRI, RICCARDO / PICOTTO, MAURO / REMONDINI, ANDREA
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Relationships are full of insecurities, and they can be pretty rocky. Often we want to be close, but we just can't seem to make it happen. That's true in our relationship with God too. When I was a chaplain one summer at a hospital, I entered a room to meet a new patient. I introduced myself as a chaplain, and the woman in the bed said, "Oh, I wish I had your faith." I probably said something like, "Why do you say that?" And she said that she couldn't believe in a god since all her family members were killed in concentration camps during World War II. I guess I said, "I'm so sorry," or something like that. Then I left and came back the next day. I had thought about it, and then I said that the reason I have faith is that I choose to. It's not because of what happens or what doesn't happen in life. For me, I just want to believe I'm not alone through it all. She nodded. but didn't say anything

In the bible we read these love letters, as if God is a person who speaks and emotes as humans do. It's a metaphor, of course. Most of us don't really believe God is a head in the sky. Some of us think of God as a human voice; others as a sense of purpose in our lives; others as an orientation to goodness. Perhaps being in love with God means hearing the voice, or acknowledging the purpose, or striving for the goodness. That's choosing to believe.

Any love relationship starts with loving ourselves first. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor *as our self* (Matthew 22:37-39). And in today's Gospel reading in the New Testament, Jesus takes the role of God and speaks of God's love for us and calls us blessed.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are the meek." Jesus is telling us that God loves us no matter what we are dealing with—poverty of spirit, deep grief, or lack of confidence. Whether we are hungry or strong enough to be merciful to others, God loves us. And if we stand up for peace, God especially loves us. And if we stand up for what is right and suffer the consequences, God especially loves us, says Jesus. He says there are many circumstances when God loves us.

This passage in Matthew is the start of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus climbed a mountain—that's the writer's way of telling us this is going to be important—and then in these Beatitudes, Jesus spells out in a list all the circumstances in which God loves us: "Blessed...blessed...blessed."

Before any other teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew, Jesus lists the ways God loves us.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning spoke of love this way:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of being and ideal grace

I have quoted from Viktor Frankl before. My family lived in Vienna, Austria when I was in 6th grade, so that my dad could study with Viktor Frankl—a psychiatrist who survived the concentration camps of World War II. Frankl had an experience just after his wife was taken from him, when he was forced to march away in a group of prisoners through the night:

We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us." That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: ...Salvation... is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way— an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man's_Search_for_Meaning).

Viktor Frankl's wife and his parents were killed in the camps. But the love he had for his wife sustained him. It gave him a purpose for which to live. He survived four camps, and when he inherited the worn clothes of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber, he found in the pocket a torn slip of paper, a page from the Hebrew Prayer Book. On it was the main Jewish Prayer, *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Frankl took this as a sign that he was to *live* his faith and to help the other inmates around him find purpose in their lives.

God loves you. You are to love God. God calls you blessed. You are to be a blessing. What does the LORD require of you in order to stay in love? To seek justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.