

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Year A

[Micah 6:1-8](#) / [Psalm 15](#) / [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#) / [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

Sermon Notes

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, p/BSG

*Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

The great division in the Anglican Communion over human sexuality became profoundly incarnate this week as many of the heads of our thirty-eight churches, our Primates, were meeting in Dublin. Seven Primates have deliberately boycotted the meeting, upset by actions of the Episcopal Church in recent years, and perhaps just as upset that the Communion hasn't done more to sanction us. One of those churches is the Anglican Church of Uganda, where we have seen in the past few years the visage of attempts to pass laws making homosexuality a capital offense. In that context, one outspoken advocate for LGBT Ugandans, David Kato, stood on dangerous but principled ground for the full dignity and rights of sexual minorities, even using Christian language to declare the oppressive nature of a longstanding taboo amongst his people -- defended as it has been by tribal traditions, Christian missionaries, and recent well-endowed efforts of leaders from the religious right in this country.

This week, as our Primates were meeting, David Kato was brutally murdered in his own home.

The Church of Uganda refused to send a priest to sanctify his burial. Instead, a lay reader of the church stood up at his funeral and began to berate the crowd about the sins of homosexuality. Kato's supporters and friends angrily took the microphone from him. Then Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, a bishop excommunicated from the Church and cut off from his pension because of his willingness to stand with LGBT Christians, led the crowd out to bury David Kato and pronounce a blessing -- a blessing uttered beyond the bounds and without the official support of the Anglican Church of Uganda. To the best of my knowledge, The Archbishop of Uganda has made no public statement yet about the events of this week. The Archbishop of Canterbury and our own Presiding Bishop have made strong statements condemning the violence. And in this curious twist, silence is deafening and empty chairs at the table seem filled with disturbing meaning.

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I imagined Christopher Senyonjo and David Kato's allies and friends standing at Kato's grave this week and also imagined their sense of spiritual impoverishment. I had to imagine our primates meeting in Dublin, and the impoverishment of their own sense of powerlessness in the face of a world gone mad with every kind of strife both inside and outside the church. I had to imagine the citizens of Egypt grasping for power long denied them as the oldest story in the playbook of world history begins to unfold with the twilight of a tyrannical regime, and not even the spectacular if alarming pulling the plug on the internet and the mobile network can stop the inevitable march of change. I had to imagine our President weighing carefully the chaos being unleashed and how even the most powerful country in the world is almost powerless to control the outcome of this process in the midst of the powder keg of the Middle East. It resonated with the powerlessness we all felt a few weeks ago

in the face of the nihilism that reigned for a few horrific moments outside a Safeway in Arizona. It is a powerlessness that resonates with the crowd Jesus is preaching to in today's Gospel – peasants of the Galilean and wider Judean and Syrian countryside leading short, often hard and brutal lives, forgotten as they were by the assiduous religiosity of the authorities and the ambitions of local puppet kings and a distant Emperor.

The prophet Micah wrestles this morning with a people who might be deluded into believing their ritual sacrifices are sufficient to placate a God sorrowful at the injustices they and their leaders have welcomed into their common life. Over half a millennium later, Paul writes to the Corinthians who live in a world incredibly different from Micah's and from our own, but like ours in one critical respect – because of the success of the Roman Empire's roads and imposed peace, Corinth was a marketplace of ideas and philosophies. Paul's little community in Corinth was struggling with their temptation to start dividing the Gospel up into the old game of schools of philosophical founders: Apollos, Paul, Cephas. . . grasping out of that game control and direction, the sense of power that comes with an assertion of their own rectitude. Their impoverishment, like ours, comes of being overwhelmed in some measure by choices and perspectives. Paul urges them to put down the claims to authority and self-righteousness and embrace the spiritual poverty of the cross – foolishness to the world, he says, shameful to the wise, laughable to cultures and philosophies of life bent on building up power and prestige, – but to those who dare to embrace Christ, the power of life itself.

It is our Christian story that speaks not when we are powerful and in charge or control, but when we are emptied of power, when we behold for a moment the shattered remains of dreams, the often hollow nature of our own material fortunes, the reflection of ourselves in the least among us: the powerless, the poverty-stricken, the homeless.

And so, Jesus opens his promise of blessing by addressing our innate spiritual impoverishment – that ours can be the “kingdom of heaven.” That it is ours when our hands are empty, when we are standing next to the tragedy of our own lives and the lives of others, when we are faced with our finitude and the danger that our lives often can seem devoid of meaning. . . it is only then that the kingdom of heaven, embodied in Christ, can come near. The cross, Paul argues, gives our lives meaning only *because* it embraces the suffering, short nature of our lives; only because it tells us God is with us when we are most vulnerable. It is from that message that we find the radical courage of Bishop Senyonjo or David Kato, or of the many witnesses throughout Christian history who have put themselves in harm's way because they have found meaning in a God who declares blessing on the nameless and the powerless, who utters the kingdom of God's promise is innately born among the least among us, is revealed when the world's power is revealed for its own emptiness, when indeed we see that the “emperor has no clothes,” and that much of the world deals in death rather than life.

Jesus' words are for us, too, even in a relatively comfortable and safe part of the planet, for we, like the Corinthians, are overwhelmed with choices and philosophies. Christianity risks becoming for us, simply one option among many. We can love its ritual and its story, we can afford sacrifices to God. But these are not enough to sustain our lives. As Micah, Paul, and Christ remind us, we become Christian not because of what we sacrifice or because of what we give our intellectual assent to, but by acknowledging our own spiritual impoverishment and taking up the way of the prophet: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God – foolishness indeed to the world, but to us the way of embracing the kingdom, of becoming by grace a People of Life. . . Children of God.