

Sermon Epiphany 4 2011 Vicar's report for Annual Meeting Jan 30, 2011

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

This famous injunction that comes to us from the Book of Micah today is the perfect job description for us as a community. At the heart of this passage is a clue as to what God's mission is in the world—nothing short than the full reconciliation of the world back to God. Our purpose as God's people is to advance God's mission of reconciliation in the world. Micah gives us our job description of how to do this in three words: justice, kindness and humility.

This Sunday is our Annual Meeting, my first with you. I'm doing something a little differently with my Vicar's report; I'm giving it to you in this sermon and will use this injunction from Micah as the context. The first time I walked into this church was in July 2009. I had voluntarily offered to go to half time to help Trinity Hartford deal with budget shortfalls. In exchange I was there half the Sundays and could use the other Sundays to explore congregations in the diocese that were seeking clergy.

That July morning, I drove down my driveway with the plan on going to church in Stafford Springs. When I got to the intersection of 195 in Storrs, I took a right hand turn taking me south rather than the left-hand turn that

would have taken me north. I found myself at St. James, and couldn't figure out how to get into the church...the front doors were closed and locked, which gives you a clue about my obsession of keeping the doors open when weather permits.

My friend Trish Cunningham was on the altar, which was a surprise to me. I knew nothing about you, but found you to be welcoming and warm. After the service Trish introduced me to Lu Sullivan and Val LaFleur. Before I left coffee hour, Val had me signed up to do supply into October.

I remember my first Sunday doing supply with you. Myra Day said to me after the service that she got a message that I was going to be the next vicar at St. James.

As the fall went on I did express interest in being part of the search process. There were three churches that I was considering, but St. James' just kept standing out in my mind. I was getting nervous.

I interviewed with the search committee and was sent on as one of the candidates to the vestry. I insisted that my spouse Art Engler be part of the interview process. We wanted to make sure that the vestry understood my family situation and it is imperative to know that the parish would accept us as we were, and were willing to support us. In that regard you have exceeded my expectations. Needless to say I was selected and agreed to come. As Joe Hockhausen tells me from time to time..."you were not my first choice, but you were the right choice." If that isn't humbling I don't know

what is.

My first formal event before I actually started was to show up at Fish and Chips. The first persons I met were Tom Evans and Ellen Browne who taught me how to wash dishes. I stayed with the dishwashing, until Lu took a chance and put in as a waiter in the fifth week. It was a wonderful baptism and way to enter the community.

I quickly took you into my heart. Your warmth and welcome not just to me but also to one another and to all those who came to the fish and chips won me over. My first Sunday was a memorable one...it was the night of the flooding and I didn't realize that the Archambeaults, the Ludlows and Tom Evans were all hit pretty hard...until a few days later. Many of you stepped forward to help these families in their hour of need.... the caring and kindness injunction of Micah. Examples of kindness and hospitality abound in this place. So much so, that people who formerly left the parish have begun to come back, which I know brings great joy to us all. The vestry's and the bishop's support of bringing Fr. Cannon back as Vicar Emeritus has meant a great deal to him and his family and to the community at large. He has been an invaluable partner in ministry to me and I look forward to many years of collaboration with him. Acts of kindness are also demonstrated in your willingness to share our parish space with groups in the community...boy and girl scouts, yoga, AA, and many families who have used the parish hall following funerals or other occasions when they had no other place to go.

In terms of Micah's call to do justice I have seen that in many projects that you have taken on as individual ministries, whether it has been support of Rev. Dixon's prison ministries, volunteering at soup kitchens, helping provide a Christmas for a family in our parish, giving to the vicar's discretionary fund, establishing lasting bonds with brothers and sisters in Ecuador, making jewelry to support cancer survivors, giving to the mite box project to help a family abroad get access to clean water, and reaching out to support the food pantry, the women's center or other programs, you have taken steps to effect justice in a world that is so very much in need. It has been noted by the vestry that when we did some reflection during the sermon time on God's mission, the input the parish gave was more and more to focus our energies to advance God's mission outside our walls. So, we'll need to pay attention to that into the future.

Walking humbly with one's God is the final injunction from Micah and arguably the most important. You have faithfully come to worship God in this place in greater numbers this year than in 2009. With some new people in the pews and returning members I look out and see a people who strive to love and serve their God. I have been part of a number of funerals and memorial services in these past 10 months. Part of walking humbly.... acting with humility in the presence of God is to make oneself vulnerable before God and with one another. I could recount many, many times when that humility was demonstrated in one on one conversations around spirituality and issues of concern. One that I will

share is a parishioner came to me before Holy Week concerned with the foot washing ceremony and said they did not feel worthy to have their feet washed and

had never done it in their life. After a couple of conversations about making oneself vulnerable before God and that this is Jesus' commandment of service one to another, this parishioner came on Maundy Thursday and was among the first to participate in the foot washing...true humility borne out in that simple ritual.

At this annual meeting you will find reports from our sexton and buildings and grounds chair, but suffice to say that one of the signs of renewed life around here has been an outpouring by various individuals to improve our physical plant. Items that have been unattended for many years have now been resolved.... you've seen the list of what has been accomplished since May 2010 and it is truly amazing...again this speaks to the value that people here understand that we have a responsibility to faithful stewards of what was left to us by those who came before us.

Lastly, one of the major points the search committee and vestry emphasized in my interviews with them was they wanted to see a push on improving stewardship. At the end of 2009 there were a total of 39 pledges totaling \$49,000.00.... an all-time low in pledging both in numbers and in revenues...making for a very difficult and stressful time for the vestry. Thanks to the leadership of Joe and Sue Hockhausen this year we anticipate pledges totaling \$87,000.00, and we're near the \$80,000.00 mark already.

As the President is fond of saying at the State of the Union, I too can

say.... from where I stand our union is strong...you are a people who have striven to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

So, what's up for next year? We will complete the new roof and need to raise about \$8,000.00 more...we already have \$22,000.00 in hand thanks to some very generous donors, before we put out a serious call to the rest of the parish. There are repairs to the sills in the undercroft of the church that will need replacing. I hope we will be able to hold a parish wide retreat for families sometime in the year. I hope we will reach out more intentionally to many people who left the parish that we'd like to see return to the family, as well as attract more new members. And, I hope we will find ways to support others outside our walls that are crying out for justice.

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Amen.