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Epiphany 4(A)

*What does the Lord require?*

Well, He has told us what is good: *Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

I say: "Do justice." You say: "Fine. What is it?"

Justice is our impartial virtue, the marble woman with the blindfold, telling us to rise above our personal self-interest, even beyond the interests of our tribe and family.

These things are so much more easily talked about than done. "Tribe" can mean gang, school, race, religion, social class, or nation. Our instinct for loyalty to these seems far stronger than any instinct we might have supporting impartiality. This is why Huckleberry Finn's conscience bothered him for helping Jim, and why police informants usually feel they are doing something wrong. And what kind of prude won't let his buddies break in the rollercoaster line at the state fair? Impartial justice is cold comfort to the prude, the snitch, and the traitor to his race.

Thomas Aquinas tells us justice is the habit of recognizing two different kinds of obligation. The first is our obligation to uphold the common good, and the second is to give the individual his due. It strikes me, there is something in that pair for both Democrats and Republicans to love.

You are in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Conway High, a Wampus Cat. (This, by the way, is one of the great names in Arkansas athletics, right there with Golden Goblins. You hear "Wampus" and you ask yourself, "What's that?"—but you've already got the picture.)

You are in algebra class, an uphill slog for everyone; but, by hard work, you are understanding the equations. It is your midterm examination. Sitting in the next desk is the Ryan Mallet of the Wampus Cats, who happens to be struggling, sort of, to maintain his academic eligibility. "Help me out bro." He wants to see your answers. Your friendship and loyalties press you to say "yes," along with your urge to be liked, accepted.

"What does the Lord require?"

You are cornered, bro. Justice doesn't cheat on tests, because cheating doesn't give individuals their due. The cheater gets more and everyone else gets less.

You are a United States Senator with an eye on Pennsylvania Avenue. A bill comes to your committee, which you know is probably bad for the economy, will not do much for the environment, and will drive up the price of corn—making it that much harder for people in Africa to eat. You also know that Africans don't vote, while Iowa farmers can turn a presidential hopeful's dreams to ashes.

You are cornered. Uphold the common good? Or get elected.

If I sound like a scold, I don't mean to. "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." That would not be me.

In the first example, I used algebra for a reason: eleventh grade algebra was the last time I cheated on a test. I picked the second example because my son is interested in politics and thinks he might decide to run for office someday. I have encouraged him to do that. Politicians will all face this dilemma: In order to "do justice," they must get themselves elected. But consider the common good: Where would we be if all able and high-minded prospects declined to enter government because it is a morally challenging profession?

Why would we care about doing justice? In my bones, I feel the pull of loyalty to family, friends and tribe. Where are my incentives for "doing the right thing?"

Personal conscience is one incentive. Our consciences are not perfect instruments, as we know by reading Huckleberry Finn; but this doesn't make them worthless. As an eleventh grader, I felt disgusted with myself for cheating and I gave it up. It was as simple as that.

Considering consequences can also serve as an incentive. For example, here is a question for my fellow college football fans: How did we enjoy feeling the suspicion that this year, when the trophies were awarded, cheating went unpunished? It made me want to fix the rules, and call in the enforcers. And now a question for you, my fellow Americans: How do we feel about life in a body politic that seems so deeply mired in office-holders' short-term political calculations, that long term problems are continually deferred beyond the horizon of the next election? I worry about it, because I fear that if we do not find our way to preserve the common good, in the form of a sustainably prosperous political economy, then we will all go down together on a sinking ship. Only revolutionists could want that, and I don't run into many revolutionists in Arkansas.

So I have identified two "negative" incentives for doing justice: individual conscience and communal self-interest. The negative of justice, "injustice," is a situation where individuals are not given their due, and the common good is not much of anyone's priority. We are familiar enough with that situation, and I think it makes us uncomfortable enough, that we may be moved to change it someday.

Now let's turn positive incentives. Being hungry isn't the only reason that we eat—we also want to eat because we like the taste of ribs and mustard greens.

"Love kindness," Micah tells us, "and walk humbly with your God."

Love of kindness is a nice, positive incentive. We call it “compassion,” and we do have a fairly strong instinct for it. We want to take casseroles to the bereaved, send medicine and blankets to victims of earthquake or terrorist attack. We were moved to help rebuild New Orleans following the hurricane.

We used to call this motivation “charity,” from the Latin *caritas*, which also translates “love.” The word charity is out of fashion and so, to some extent, is the idea. Today, many justice advocates seem impatient with talk of charity. I congratulate myself for doing something extra, while they believe I am only giving individuals their due.

In America, we find disagreement, both about the common good and what the individual is due. Disagreements are inevitable, and we have politics to address them. But, whatever our politics, life without *caritas* would be bleak. To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis: “always winter, never Christmas.”

If justice is a marble woman in a blindfold, *caritas* is St. Nicholas arriving Christmas Eve, for no better reason than to make the children happy. This love of kindness is a positive incentive for looking to the common good, and giving individuals their due.

Our final incentive is religious. Micah tells us: “Walk humbly with your God.” I know that, nowadays, pretty much no one wants to be called “religious.” But, in one way or another, we all are. “Religion,” as Christopher Morse put it, “is how we position ourselves with respect to that which we hold sacred.”

Everyone holds something sacred. Just watch how we orient our lives, and you can find out what our sacred object is. Knowledge, beauty, health, self, sex, money . . . I suppose the list is endless. Many sacred-somethings are fashionable these days. Some are not.

It seems that our religion, Christianity, is not fashionable at all right now. It would, however, be a mistake for us to think that this won’t change. These other things around which people orient their lives are going to fail them; they are failing them now. Sooner or later, and I think sooner is a distinct possibility, many of them will see this. How could they not?

What about us? To what sacred object do we Christians orient our lives? The question answers itself. We call ourselves Christian because we hold Christ sacred, and we orient our lives to him. Justice and kindness are tell-tale signs of this religious orientation. At the very least, we are trying. “Just a closer walk with thee, grant it Jesus is my plea.”

We do not orient ourselves to Jesus only as a man: prophet, teacher and beautiful example of justice and *caritas* in action. He is not less than any of that to us, but he is also more. Jesus, kind and just, is God’s message to the world: “From before all worlds, this is who I am.”

God in Christ is the sacred center toward which we orient our lives, and he doesn't fail us, ever.

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain . . . sat down . . . and began to speak:* Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn, the merciful and meek. Blessed are the peaceful and the pure in heart. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, and who suffer for it sometimes. Blessed are the snitches, prudes and traitors to their race. "Rejoice," he says. "Be glad, for your reward is great."

Is Jesus talking about heaven?

Well that doesn't sound much like Arkansas.

Of course it is heaven. Wouldn't the world as described by the Sermon on Mount be heaven? And anything less than such a world would not be.

Almost certainly, to see this world in more than fragmentary glimpses, first we will have to die. That is why we approach death not only with dread, which is our natural instinct, but also with anticipation, which is grace.

That is for later. For the meantime, we have our work cut out for us, the work the Lord requires: justice, kindness, and true religion.

Get out there, you Wampus Cats, and show us how its done.