

# The Processes of God Challenge Us to Let Go of Control” by Ron Kraybill

January 29, 2017

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany



Micah 61-8.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5 1-12

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So it's 2017 and we look ahead to the New Year. Now's a time when many of us think about expectations and plans. One of my seminary professors used to constantly ask in his Ethics class, "How would we view this issue from the perspective of the afterlife?" So what is important for you and for me in 2017, from the perspective of the afterlife? If we could view our lives this year from a perspective of 20, 40, or 100 years from now, what is actually important? (Ponder that

question for a minute)

Let's now ponder the question in light of the texts we heard.

The Micah text makes it clear it's not about sacrifice – the conventional path to salvation. It's "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Matthew says that the Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are criticized by others. Blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers.

For Paul, there's a new dimension, embracing weakness and vulnerability as the path to God's new way.

[26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world.]

In my work as a conflict resolution consultant and trainer, the concept that I talk about more than any other is "good process". In training I contrast a Process focus with an outcome focus. Outcome is the destination we are trying to reach. Process is how we get there. Many of us share a wish for an outcome of justice, but there are diverse processes that could be used to achieve justice. Shooting all the bad guys is one process. Engaging the bad guys in ways that challenge them to make better choices is quite a different kind of process. In South Africa, during the political transition there was a time when a terrible wave of violence swept the nation. Many were worried, including the white government. One of the government ministries announced a conference – let all those who are concerned about the violence come this conference talk about it. Now imagine, if you were a black community leader in SA in 1991 and a white

government minister announces a conference to be convened by the government, all planned out and he wants you to attend, would you go? Many did not. It was potentially a good outcome being sought, but it was a bad process. Sponsored by one key party, No consultation. The conference was held but only whites attended and a few blacks considered sellouts. And the violence continued. A few weeks later, a group of black and white leaders got together. Business leaders, church leaders. They agreed to try again. This time they used a different process. The conference would be jointly convened by black and white leaders. It would be announced as a joint initiative and the agenda would be jointly formed. This time the agreements to attend came immediately. Yes, yes, yes. The conference was held and from it emerged agreements central to the peace process.

The difference is the process. What we call in peacebuilding "good process". Much of my work in peacebuilding is about creating good processes in the aftermath of terrible ones. One of the things that strikes me about the texts in our reading this morning is that they direct us towards processes, not towards particular outcomes. The Lord is not concerned that we show success in achieving this or that characteristic of the Kingdom. The Lord is concerned with how we engage the human beings around us. I realize when I read these texts that the pounding heart I've often felt in relation to the political events of the last year is a "worldly" response. It comes from that illusion that rises so persistently in all of us that we have to win, have to achieve X results, Y outcomes.

The texts assert: Not in the processes of God! What matters is the processes by which we engage those around us. What matters is that we are kind, honest, considerate, fair and generous in how we use money, that we do not glory in power and the illusion that exercise of power makes things right.

We are to seek out those who are weak and vulnerable and stand with them. That is not so hard to see on a Sunday morning when we sit with others who are gripped by the vision of God's

work in the world. But it is much harder to remember tomorrow morning when we read the Washington Post and when we travel the streets of this city and go to offices and malls. A vision is one thing – but remembering to see the world thru the lens of that vision is another. We need reminders that help us remember.

So what are your reminders for 2017? May I suggest that you consider as an identifier of the most powerful ones – those situations where you feel most intensely a sense of loss of control. The worldly processes out there that do so much damage to human beings, that rob people of human rights and a decent life are about control. People with power insist on having control over other human beings. The texts we read today call on us to share that control. More than that, they seem to suggest that being close to those who don't have control brings us closer to God's kingdom. And in a most interesting way, the issue of being in control is a deeply personal issue as well. We are wired at a deep level, probably by the results of evolution itself, to be agents, to seek to be in charge of the little worlds we create for ourselves. A lot of the challenge of aging, it seems to me, is about living with less and less control over the world; until in the end we control nothing at all. How shall we then live, especially in a time when many of the outcomes we have fought hard for seem gravely threatened at this time?

– We can take new joy in the moment in the processes of Gospel, in the simple gift of being with other human beings; in standing with those who are weak, regardless to the outcome. Many of us experienced the lift of togetherness at the Women's Day March. For me Small group and church become even more important.

– At a very personal level, we can practice disciplines of setting aside our longing to control things around us. Our lives bring for all of us many moments when we are frustrated and long to impose order on things we really can't. Living

with 2 eight year olds presents me with such moments many times every day. (And: Having those eight year olds rattling around the church building gives you the same opportunity on Sunday mornings!)

For some of us it might be sitting in traffic; for others it might be diminished mobility with aging or recuperation from surgery. Life presents us with opportunities almost by the hour to practice the processes of the Kingdom. All we need to do is stop fighting loss of control. See these moments as opportunities to view the world through the eyes of weakness.

As the Buddhists say, "Also this..."When we live in this way the daily frustrations of life become a spiritual path that lays a foundation for a kind of presence in our social and political work that is transformative. So I invite you now to cast your thoughts again to the year ahead and whatever previous ideas you had about your calling. To what extent are they outcome ideas? What would change if you saw your calling this year in terms of the processes of the God's Kingdom, and not its outcomes?