

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 2, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Micah 6:6-8
Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon: Admission Requirements

One of my earliest memories from early childhood was seeing my mother pack bags for my older sister and brother who were going to stay at my grandparents to attend their church's Vacation Bible School. I wanted to go too! But my mother said I was staying home. When I asked her WHY? over and over again, my mother finally said: Because you can't tie your own shoes yet.

To be fair to her, that was probably just one small example that was used in a much longer explanation: You have to be four years old, they only have room for two children, I'm afraid you're going to be homesick, yadda, yadda, yadda... But all I heard was *you can't tie your own shoes yet* – which was true.

For the next 24 hours I tried to tie my own shoes, and I wound up with such knots that my mother had to cut the shoelaces off me – which just proved her point. No vacation bible school for kids who can't tie their own shoes.

I got it all twisted in my head. Vacation Bible School was at church – church meant being one of God's people – and God's people go to heaven. To my mind, she might as well have said: You're not going to heaven – not if you can't tie your own shoes.

So I think I believed, that someday - there I'd be, standing at the pearly gates, hoping St Peter didn't notice that I was still in flip flops.

Ever since the beginning of Christian faith, it seems, the people who followed Jesus have had some very different and sometimes strange ideas about what the admission requirements might be. Even Jesus himself was challenged, at times, to spell out what it would take to win eternal life.

For a long time, the traditional Christian church kept a long list of admission requirements – whether they were written or unwritten:

No swearing, no drinking, no divorce; No women in the pulpit, no children in communion, no non-Christians going to heaven;

No questioning the minister, no new creeds or new hymn books, we tried that once it didn't work – so basically the answer was always just don't mess up the way we've always done things!

A lot of those admission requirements have fallen away (thank goodness!) But I think for a lot of people outside the walls of the church, the impression still stands. They think

that we in the church believe that some people just aren't good enough to be admitted. We just haven't quite figured out what "good enough" means.

I had a friend who was excommunicated from his church for being gay. Another who was shunned by her faith community when she refused to sign their articles of faith. Another whose pastor met with her and told her, as gently as possible, that she would have to be married elsewhere, because her fiancé was Jewish.

All of it perfectly well-intentioned, biblically justified and offered with the deepest sincerity.

Right off the bat, I want to say I do not believe in the pearly gates: that one eternal judgement – heaven or hell vision of the afterlife. I prefer to think of judgement as an everyday reality – we judge our own actions according to the vision we know in Jesus. We believe that we are forgiven for the mistakes we have made and try to do better tomorrow.

As to those metaphorical pearly gates, I think we will ALL be standing there, hoping that St Peter hasn't noticed the times we have fallen short of the vision. And I'm not talking about flip-flops either. I also believe that every time he will find us good enough for God's welcome – because that too is part of the vision we know in Jesus.

In our scripture readings today, we have heard two perspectives on what it means to live in faith every day. One is from the prophet Micah, the other from the gospel of Matthew. These are both memorable superstar scriptures, across the Christian community. They capture the essence of the gospel so beautifully, and have done so in every generation.

Seven hundred years before Jesus climbed the mountain to preach in our gospel reading, Judea, Micah's homeland, was enjoying a time of prosperity and faith revival. The temple was full of people, offerings were finally on the surplus side, people held religious life in high esteem.

But Micah knew that something was wrong – there was an arrogance in Judea's success, an insensitivity to people who were less affluent, there was pride in their awesome worship, but less concern about those who were hungry or exploited or despairing.

The prophet pictured God charging the people with neglect, neglect of both their neighbor and their faith.

"But the temple is overflowing!" They defended themselves: "there are more sacrifices than ever before! What more do you want?"

The prophet said to them "Do you really think THIS makes God happy? Demonstrating your wealth instead of God's justice? Feeding the temple fires instead of feeding the hungry? Puffing yourself up when you should be prostrate on the ground with gratitude?"

It's not about how much you give, but where it goes. Does your offering do justice, love kindness, and help you to walk more humbly with your creator?"

Seven centuries later, another faithful group were saying to Jesus "The crowds are too big! Send some away – the outsiders, the poor, the sinners..."

But Jesus just climbed a taller hill, where everyone could see him. What he said turned their idea of success on its head: "Blessed are the poor, and the grieving and the meek," he said, "Because they can see the world in a way that the comfortable and the complacent cannot. Blessed are those who show mercy and kindness and justice – for they are children of God. Blessed are you when others don't understand you, because that means you are doing things a new way – in God's way."

For Matthew, Jesus was the centre of God's unified, infinite timeline. In my childhood imagination heaven and earth were divided by those pearly gates. There was everyday life – and then there was heaven or the afterlife. You were in or you were out. You made it through the gate – or not.

But for Matthew, and for Jesus, there was no dividing line. There was regular everyday life, and there was the fullness of God's presence in the here and now – for Matthew, something he encountered in Jesus.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit – for theirs IS the kingdom." Jesus said. Not just in the future, not after death, not a far off reward, but now.

Some of the blessings in the beatitudes are future-oriented, "blessed are the meek for they WILL inherit the earth", but the blessing is always offered in the present moment, the blessing is now. What are you waiting for? Jesus asked – the kingdom is here.

All those who fill their hearts and minds with Jesus' perspective on the world today, with God's big and generous compassion, will know that the blessing is now.

As a community of faith, we come together in worship, in study, in service, in spiritual growth. We gather together, so that when we leave this place, we take those tools of the Spirit with us. Like a big pair of God-goggles that help us see God's goodness in everyone we meet. Like a strong pair of work boots so that we can stand firm in our witness for justice. Like a roadmap that shows us where we need to go, and what direction we need to turn to get there.

Never once in the beatitudes did Jesus say "you should", let alone "you have to." Never once did Jesus give us requirements for admission to God's kingdom – simply be blessed, be a blessing, and you will find you are already there.

When Micah asked "What does the Lord require of you?" he answered his own question with the simplest and most challenging of all invitations.

Because these are things that we can all accomplish – if only we forgo the rivers of oil and that firstborn sacrifices that we THINK we need. If only we shape our own hearts and minds in the way that God sees us and creation around us.

- To do justice
- To love kindness
- To walk humbly with your God.

We are not required to do or be anything – we are simply invited to stand before our creator and accept God's invitation.

Whatever our abilities

Whatever our past, present or future mistakes

Whatever we have to offer

We belong to God – may we seek to live in God's way, with gratitude and with blessing. Amen