

Epiphany 4 A – What Does God Want?  
Sermon preached by the Rev. Penny A. Nash  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church  
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When my children were little, I wanted to teach them many things. Some were practical things: How to feed the cats, how to do the laundry and fold clothes.

Some of the things I wanted them to learn were more about character: Being thoughtful. Being curious and reverent. Learning to think for themselves.

This was hard, for all of us. So often I felt in such a hurry. We all seemed to be so busy. Sometimes I found it easier, and of course much faster, just to do things myself than to patiently teach. And sometimes the kids also felt it was easier for me to do their chores myself than to teach them how.

And sometimes we all got mixed up about what was practical and what was related to maturity and character. Sometimes I asked a question (Does the garbage need taking out?) because I wanted them to learn to notice what needed doing and then do it.

And sometimes the exasperated response was: Look, Mom, if you want me to take out the garbage, just say so.

What I wanted was for them to be aware of what it takes to live together as a family and to, on their own initiative, do their part, to share in taking responsibility for everyone's well-being. What they wanted was a checklist that I maintained for them.

Sometimes this was an exercise in frustration on both sides. Occasionally I might even hear one of them say to the other, Sheesh! What does she WANT?!?

This is, in a very small way, like what is happening in our reading from the prophet Micah today. God is trying to teach us what kind of people we

should be, and how we are to live together, caring for one another's well-being, but we are asking for a checklist about what to do.

OK, we should offer God a sacrificial gift. Should it be a cow? A goat? A thousand goats?

Tell us, God, what do you want so we can just give it to you and check it off our list and get on with our life.

Yes, there are things that are good to do to honor and follow me, says God. But those actions are to come from inside you -growing out of what kind of person you are, not from an external check list. What I want is for you to notice what it takes to live together in right relationship, as my people, and to do your part.

Integral to God's identity (and therefore ours, since we are made in the image of God)is "righteousness," which means being in right relationship with both God and our neighbor.

When theologian James Allison says that "the only conceivable victory is one in which no one triumphs over anyone else but all the participants are reconciled as equal," that's another way of describing being in right relationship.

So, says God, being my people is not about bulls.

What I want, says God, is for you to do justice. And that means look around you and see what is not right - in your life, in your community, in the world - and then to do something about it to make things right.

I had a friend who felt this verse was the most important in the whole Bible. So she went to law school and eventually became a judge because she felt that this was the way she could guarantee that she was "doing justice."

But we all are involved in justice issues.

For my children when they were young, it might mean sitting at lunch with the unpopular kid who was treated cruelly by classmates. For my judge friend, it might mean making sure people were treated fairly under the law.

Doing justice means taking a stand against injustice - speaking up in word and deed for someone being wronged - or, as Bishop Rob Wright of Atlanta

said in his address to our annual convention of the Diocese on Friday, justice is revolting against anything and everything that is not love. Doing justice begins with looking at the ideal, he said, (that is, the Kingdom of God as our Scriptures describe it) and at the same time looking at the realities in our world, and noticing the gap between them. That gap is where justice is needed.

If you've been glued to the coverage of the executive order on immigration like I have these last three days, you've seen that gap yawning wide, and you've seen not only the official justice system but ordinary people working urgently in that gap using whatever talents they could offer.

And what I want, says God, is for you to love kindness. To be kind. As the saying goes, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." So be the sort of person who is kind in your speech, in your attitudes, in your actions. Which is not necessarily the same as "being nice." Kindness calls for acting out of my soul, the part of me that is so intimately connected to God.

And finally, God says, what I want is for you to walk humbly with me. This one, for me, is the hardest of all. Humility is not my strong suit. It means listening intentionally and intently for God to speak to me instead of relying on my own ideas. It means listening to God instead of to fear. Because God has plans for me, and for you that are way better than our plans for God. It means forgetting myself and my opinions and pre-conceived notions so I can tune in to God - putting aside my will in order to discern God's will - which, as we should have learned by now is likely to be surprising.

Just listen to Jesus say that the poor, the grieving, the persecuted, the meek, the reviled are blessed. That was not what the people around him were expecting to hear (and maybe not us, either).

But they are blessed because in God's world they are going to receive justice. They are going to experience kindness. They, the reviled, the persecuted, the peacemakers, God is walking with them.

But in our world, many of them are still waiting, literally.

So, given that reality, as we look unflinchingly into that gap, what does the Lord require of us, but to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God?