

Justice, Mercy, Humility

“Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly” – the words should sound familiar to you. “Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly” – these are probably the only words that most people remember from the book of the prophet Micah, if indeed they remember their source at all. “Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly” – they have become a kind of bumper sticker theology, a short-cut, shorthand for what one can only hope is a deeper, more thought out approach to life. “Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly.” The problem, of course, is that like any other slogan, like any other sentiment plastered to the back of a car, these words lose some, perhaps even most of their meaning when removed from their context. So, I’m sure it will come as no surprise to most of you that I want to spend a little time this morning putting those words into their context. Who was this fellow Micah and what was his deal? Why did he feel that God was sending him to talk to God’s people about justice, mercy, and humility? What did he mean by those words and what should they mean to us? How, then, shall we live?

In some ways, the story of Micah should seem strangely familiar to us. Micah is from Moresheth, a farming village in the fertile country of Judah. But his messages are not primarily to his fellow villagers but rather to the inhabitants of the cities, specifically the seats of power, the capitals of Israel and Judah; that is, Samaria and Jerusalem, respectively. Although there are promises for the faithful in the pronouncements of Micah, overall his surviving words are words of judgement to those who dwell in the cities. They have been blessed by God with wealth and power, yet they have misused that power and mistreated those whom they could have helped. They have seized the fields of the poor, thrown them out of their homes and left them hopeless. They have erected holy places to other gods and given them the honor they owe to Yahweh. They have dealt dishonestly in business; they have failed to honor their elders.

The story of the pious country mouse offended by the sins of his city cousins is a familiar trope in literature and entertainment. Very often, in that literature and entertainment, the country mouse is made a figure of fun, too strait-laced to enjoy life, too naïve to understand the sophisticated virtues of the city. Think of the story I told last week about the University of Illinois student who, coming from a small farming village herself, was bewildered by her professor’s offer to provide the class with Panera – shorthand her peers all understood to mean soup and sandwiches from the trendy, St. Louis-based eatery. Just as the writer, Eboo Patel, realized that he had discounted the experience of that country mouse student, so those of us living in the shadow of sophisticated Seattle may disregard the admonishments of our conservative kin in fly-over country without stopping to think that they, too, are children of God, our fellow Americans, our brothers and sisters with their own valid concerns, their own deeply held convictions. The fact that President Trump’s victory caught so many sophisticated political observers by surprise has a lot to do with the fact that many of them had simply failed to take seriously the deep dissatisfaction and anger of Middle America. As we hearken to the voice of Micah, we should not forget that he, too, was a man from outside the power structure delivering a word of judgment to those who had abused power.

In the dialogue that Micah imagines between God and the leaders of Israel and Judah in our passage this morning, Micah has been sent to plead the case of God as a lawyer pleads a case in court. In fact, in this context, that is exactly what the repeated word “controversy” means. It is not, as it has come to mean for us, a widely discussed topic of public events but rather a technical court term. I think in the court system of today, “complaint” would be the equivalent. God’s

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complaint against the rulers of God's people has already been laid out: they are greedy, they cheat, they take advantage of their power to steal from the poor and to abuse them. This was not their charge from God and they know it. The regulations in Torah about feeding the poor, caring for the weak, and dealing forthrightly with all are clear and unmistakable. Moreover, God reminds them, they have God to thank for everything they have which they have misused.

Micah cites several instances of God's blessing, some of which will be familiar and some of which are more obscure. I think most of us here today understand that the origin story for the combined kingdoms of Judah and Israel is what we have in our Bible as Exodus. The ancestors of the city-dwellers and the country-dwellers alike were wandering herders who came into captivity in Egypt. Through a series of miracles, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel raised up leaders for the Hebrews in Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and led them across the desert out of slavery. The story of Balak and Balaam is from the latter part of the sojourn in the wilderness. Alarmed by the way in which Moses' army has defeated the armies of Bashan and of the Amorites, King Balak of Moab hires the diviner Balaam to curse the Israelites before they come to battle with Moab. But Balaam, as it turns out, was an honest worshipper of God and could only deliver blessings and curses as permitted by God. So instead of cursing the forces of Israel as he was hired to do, Balaam pronounced blessings upon them and Balak withdrew from the field. What Israel's enemy meant as evil toward them was changed to good by the action of God.

Micah also reminds his hearers that God has forgiven them before when they have transgressed. In their unimpeded stay in Moabite territory after the incident with Balak and Balaam, some of the men of Israel got, shall we say, close with the women of Moab. Some even offered sacrifice to the gods those women worshipped. All of this happened in Shittim, named by Micah. But despite this misbehavior, God still provided Israel with a leader, Joshua, after the death of Moses and they still journeyed safely to Gilgal, also mentioned by Micah, which was their first encampment in the Promised Land. In citing these obscure-to-us stories, Micah is reminding the people that God is always ready to begin again with God's people, always ready to bless, even when the people turn their backs on their fount of every blessing.

Were he to ride into town today, on the turnip truck or any other conveyance, Micah might well remind us of the same things. God has continued to bless our nation despite our collective misbehavior. Despite our mistreatment of those among us who are weaker – the immigrants, the poor, women, children, those whose labor we've exploited, those whose land we have stolen – we have nevertheless grown into the mightiest power on earth. And yet so many of us continue to act in ways that break God's heart as we fail to put our love of God and our love of neighbor ahead of our own selfish desires and schemes.

What we cannot do, what we must not do, is to attempt, as did Micah's contemporaries, to buy our way out of trouble. "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" Giving even abundance out of our abundance is not the answer. The fact of the matter is that we have what we have in trust from God already. God does not want things or stuff or money from us except in that we are using those things to accomplish something greater. God doesn't want the

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easy checkbook answer. God requires the deep actions of our lives that come from a loving heart. God has told us what is good.

First, what God wants from us is justice. We need to be very careful how we understand this requirement. I find in conversations and in monitoring the media and observing life that we here in the United States don't always show a good understanding of what Biblical justice is all about. The way we use the word "justice" in our society is often about retribution. When a malefactor is arrested, convicted, imprisoned or even killed, we say "justice has been done." But what we're really talking about is punishment, even vengeance. When the Scriptures talk about justice, we need to be aware that it is much more a sense of things being put right, of oppressors and victims being brought back into right relationship, of the injured being made whole again. So for us to "Do Justice," we must contribute energy to efforts that do these things and not their opposites. We must remember the ones that God told us to care for – the immigrants, the orphans, the widows. These are the ones without power in our world, the ones who need advocates, the ones who will not make it without help. We must remember the ones that Jesus talked about, the ones he called "the least of these my brothers and sisters." Jesus called us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to heal the sick, to comfort the broken. We forget sometimes that in the Scriptures the concepts of justice and mercy or kindness are actually closely allied.

We should see this when we connect the first and second clauses of our bumper-sticker saying: "Do Justice, Love Mercy" or kindness. I think I prefer the translation "mercy" here for the Hebrew "hesed." It reminds us that God's kindness, forgiveness, and love is so often freely given to those who absolutely don't deserve it. Since I haven't shocked you all with it in this space lately, I'll repeat Rev. Will Campbell's infamous wisdom: "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway." If we, who fail so often to deliver God's justice to those around us, can still be the recipients of God's mercy, then shouldn't those who fail us be the ones to whom we show mercy? It has been very easy for me in recent days to excoriate in thought or conversation those whom I feel are not meeting the mark of justice. And while I will not apologize for calling attention to those failings, I must remember that I, too, am a fallen, failing, human being. I must love mercy if I am to walk humbly with God.

Sometimes, I think that walking humbly with God is the hardest part of this tripartite commandment to follow. It's really easy, not to mention satisfying, to cloud up and rain all over someone that we think is unjust, especially in absentia. It can likewise be gratifying to play the part of the benevolent superior and bestow mercy upon the wretched. I think of the last scene of the movie and the play *Amadeus*, as Salieri is wheeled off-stage blessing and forgiving the "mediocrities" he has addressed throughout – "*Te absolvo, te absolvo...*" But in fact, none of us have the last word on justice; none of us have the ultimate right to bestow mercy. We are to do justice and to love mercy but we do not control them. That is for God. That is for God and we are merely humans, made by God from the humus, the soil that gives us the Latin words for human and for humility. We are, as my friend Father John likes to say, the mud-creatures and if we start to try to put ourselves in the place of God then we have gotten way above ourselves. Only in walking humbly with God can we lay claim to even glimpsing justice, let alone doing it. Only in walking humbly with God can we have any sense of what love of mercy truly means.

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“Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly” – I find this divine combination so terribly, terribly important for us in these troubled times. If we insist on justice but forget mercy and humility, then we will soon find ourselves on the pathway to revolution that could make the Terror of Revolutionary France or the purges of Stalin or Pol Pot look mild in comparison. If we practice humility and mercy without insisting on justice, then our country is headed for a new Era of Good Stealing at best. We cannot turn our backs on the world’s poor and beleaguered. We cannot relegate women and people of color to second-class citizenship. We cannot snatch life-giving medical advances from the hands of the masses and make them only the privilege of the rich. But neither can we declare enmity upon those who voted for the current powers because they could see no other way out of their trouble, or because they honestly believed in the promises, or because finally they were just plain human, just like we are.

Just plain human, that’s us. Just plain tempted, just plain fallen, just plain scared. All of us, from time to time, forget about justice. All of us, from time to time, forget about mercy. All of us, from time to time, forget to be humble. But the Good News, the news that Jesus came to bring, is that God never forgets mercy. Never forgets how we need it. Never forgets us poor broken souls who need it so badly.

As we close, let me share with you some beautiful words about mercy from the great William Shakespeare, from his play The Merchant of Venice. As so often in Shakespeare, the pure soul with the great words is a woman, in this case Portia:

“The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
‘T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice.”

God’s justice is always seasoned by mercy. May ours so also be, in our humility. Thanks be to God. Amen.