

Sermon – Just Mercy
Sunday, February 2, 2020
Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Micah 6:1-8, transcends the immediate context of Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE to bring a message relevant for all times. In this ancient poem, a courtroom is depicted with Yahweh God presenting a case against Israel, and Creation serving as the jury. Following the persuasive testimony of Yahweh, Israel offers no self-defense but asks a series of questions regarding what the Lord requires. The Word of the Lord:

1 Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with God's people, and God will contend with Israel. 3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." 6 "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8 God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Amen.

With these words from the prophet Micah on our hearts and minds, we turn to our second scripture reading in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1-12. Jesus' ministry begins with the Sermon on the Mount, the most comprehensive collection of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament. In these teachings, we discover continuity between what is required of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven and what is required of the covenant children of Israel. Jesus begins his teachings with the beatitudes, which reverse the world's value system and pronounce blessings on the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. To interpret "blessed" as "happy" misses the depth of meaning in this word. The blessed, for Jesus, are those who experience a sense of peace, an inner strength and well-being...it is well with their soul. The blessed are those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. Listen now for God's word.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The title of the sermon: Just Mercy

Text: God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, as we reflect together on what you require, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Accountability is a good thing and today we at Westminster Presbyterian Church hold one another accountable in the presentation of the 2019 Annual Report. Our hope and prayer is that amid the important and sometimes tedious details within this report, we get a glimpse of a faith community invested in the work of justice and kindness with humility. The purpose and the discipline of preparing this document is not to justify ourselves and our own righteousness but rather to be accountable for what the Lord requires, recognizing our small part in the greater good of the kingdom of heaven.

It is not uncommon for people of faith to get caught up in religious practices or specific doctrines and lose sight of what the Lord requires. For Micah's contemporaries it was the familiar and well-defined practice of sacrificial offerings which got in the way. This religious ritual has not been practiced by Judaism since the first century following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. However, during Micah's time burnt sacrifices as thanksgiving or sin offerings were presented in the Temple regularly. The question about offering one's first born reflects a practice of Israel's neighboring cultures. Human sacrifice was never allowed in Israelite religion and the prophets spoke sharply against it.

Micah seeks to clarify what God requires. Rather than being consumed with religious practices that justify oneself, people of faith are expected to *do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God.*

To walk humbly suggests an attitude of reverence and openness, coupled with a sense of personal integrity, candor and honesty. To walk humbly acknowledges one's shortcomings and need for forgiveness. Only when one learns to walk with humility will one understand how to do justice and love kindness.

Not unlike Micah, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount sought to clarify what God requires. Jesus' contemporaries focused on keeping the letter of the law without concern for others. Throughout Jesus' ministry he confronts religious leaders who are arrogant and more concerned with justifying themselves and their own righteousness than blessing the ones whose lives need healing and comfort. In the beatitudes Jesus offers *hope, inner strength and well-being to those who mourn and those whose spirits are weary, kindness and respect to the peacemakers who absorb hostilities they don't deserve, gentleness to the meek, humanity to the merciful, and compassion to the persecuted.*

Today well-intended people still get caught up in a particular religious practice or doctrine. More concerned with justifying ourselves than seeking justice for others, we lose sight of the bigger picture of what God calls us to do. Micah and Jesus remind us of this danger within governments and faith communities who claim to be just and yet show no mercy; who claim to be righteous and yet deny the truth. God desires more than empty words and rituals!

The phrase *Just Mercy* is a “double entendre” or, in French, a figure of speech devised to be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it is a plea to at least attain some degree of mercy. On the other hand, it is a qualification for the kind of mercy that achieves absolute justice. Micah and Christ expect both!

Bryan Stevenson, a young African American lawyer chose the title *Just Mercy* for his 2014 memoir, recently depicted in a movie by the same name. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Mr. Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor and the wrongly condemned. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, an African American man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he did not commit. The case drew Stevenson into a tangle of conspiracy, political maneuvering, and legal brinkmanship which transformed his understanding of justice and mercy forever.

Just Mercy is an unforgettable account of a gifted young lawyer’s coming of age, a moving narrative of the lives of those he defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of justice, richly woven together with Christian imagery.

In 2018, Stevenson and his organization opened the Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Both are dedicated to the legacy of slavery, lynching, segregation and mass incarceration in the United States. For Stevenson, the museum and the monument are an effort to address the past ---and to change the future. He believes that unless the sins of our past are acknowledged, owned and confessed, we will not experience restorative justice or just mercy.

He writes, “We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others.”

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

In a few moments, our choir will sing a song based on Micah 6. I learned it as a young woman at the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference, and I have sung it through the years in church, with my family around the piano, even in the shower. In fact, I have a distinct memory of singing this verse in the kitchen of our Clayton home. As I looked out the window and chanted “to seek justice and love kindness,” I didn’t realize that our son Paul, who was almost four at the time, was listening so intently, until he stood by my side, looked out the window with me, and asked, “Mom, where is justice?”

As Paul nears graduation from law school, I’d like to paraphrase his question to each of us. Where is the kindness and just mercy in our lives? By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, may we live our lives in a joyful response and walk humbly with God. Amen.