

Micah 6:1-8 Pastor Bill Uetricht 4 Epiphany 2/2/20

There are some Biblical passages that just have this way of not only grasping my attention but re-orienting my life, making it clear to me what life is about and what I and we are to be about. Today's reading from Micah is one of those passages. It's always been one of my favorites. It's why we named our firstborn what we did. And this past week as I struggled again with this passage, I found it even more compelling.

Micah is addressing both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel during the eighth century B.C.E., a time when portions of Israel's population were living quite well. The economy was working for some folks, especially those on the top of the economic and political ladders. Micah is warning the nation that some troubling days are ahead and is calling them to think about how they are living as a community.

In today's particular text, Micah is depicting God as having a controversy with his people. Some scholars see it as a courtroom drama. For me, it also just feels like family drama.

The courtroom location for the drama appears at the beginning. Hear, what the Lord says. Rise, O prosecuting attorney, plead your case. And do so, "before the mountains; let the hills hear your voice." Nature is being asked to bear witness to God's complaint, to his controversy with his people.

And then God sounds like a pleading parent: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what I wearied you? Answer me. I've got to know. I don't know how I've offended you. After all, I led you out of slavery. I gave you great leaders. I reversed the words of someone who wanted to speak bad of you. I brought you into the Promised Land. What more could I have done?"

One of the things that I really appreciate about this text is God's willingness to be quite vulnerable with his people. He is remarkably

honest today. He takes the relationship he has with his people with utmost seriousness. This is not a God who is ready to abandon his people to their bad behavior. This is not a God who completely closes off conversation. He seeks the dialogue with his people. "Answer me! Tell me!" We're in this together; respond!

Well, the people do respond. They ask, "What do we need to do to make you, God, happy?" Now admittedly, they get a little flippant in their response. They overstate the case. They become like our kids, or frankly like many of us, by responding with defensiveness.

"So, what do you want from us, God? What do you expect from us? Do you want some burnt offerings, with calves a year old?" Now that is a conservative, traditional approach, not over the top. But it doesn't take long for the exaggeration to begin.

"Do you want *thousands* of rams, with ten *thousands* of rivers of oil?" The exaggeration has arrived. The defensiveness has appeared. And they continue with these words, "I guess what you want is my firstborn. Is that going to take care of your requirements?"

These are typical responses to what is perceived as the demand of God on our lives. "You just want so much. We can never please you." And we think that what God wants from us has to do with some kind of religious behavior. That, obviously, is where religious people often go. So, you want me to be in church all the time, serve on every kind of committee, sacrifice like no one can sacrifice, be a prim and proper church lady and man, have no naughty thoughts, be ritually and morally pure. That should meet your requirements.

But according to Micah, that isn't what God wants. What does the Lord require of you? Here it is: to do justice. That is, make sure everybody is included. Don't leave the poor out. Help create a society in which everybody gets to share in the goods that belong to all of us, not just to a few.

And love *kindness*, while you are at it. *Hesed* is the word in Hebrew. It is hard to define, but it generally refers to the steadfast love that God has for God's people. So, love as God loves. That's what God wants. He wants your love—love that doesn't come and go but remains; love that sticks with people in and out of season.

And lastly, what does the Lord require? "Your walking humbly with God." The term "humbly" may be a bad translation, or at least inadequate, since humility is too often defined by people as meanness, some kind of false modesty. The call is not to pretend that you don't matter. (That is far from the truth!) The call is to walk resolutely, attentively with God. And by the way, when you do that you will recognize your place in the world. You won't have to be the center of the universe because you aren't. Attentiveness to the ways of God bring us to honesty about our place in the universe.

It's interesting to me. When you look at what God requires, according to Micah, you discover that it is a lot simpler than you initially think. And what's more, you find out that what God is looking for has to do with *relationship*. What matters to him is our relationship with God and one another.

Yet we are so busy trying to be religious, something that, by the way, religious and non-religious people try to do. It's obvious when it comes to religious people. They are often churchy and preachy. They, as Jesus says, practice their piety before people, while maintaining sewers in their hearts .

The non-religious people, on the other hand, just use secular means to be religious. They speak the words right. They are "politically correct," we say these days. They do all the right things, defend all the right causes. They are oh so pure, and sometimes so judgmental in the process.

It's not purity that God wants. What he wants is justice, kindness, and a faithful walk with him. What he wants is right relationship, not simply between individuals, but in community as well. He wants the community to reflect who he is, which by the way, is what Jesus is saying in his beatitudes today.

In these pithy little statements, Jesus is blessing a whole lot of people. But you've got to notice that the people he is blessing, the people he is honoring are often those who are thought not to be honored or blessed by the world. He honors the poor and those who understand what it means to be poor, those who mourn over their situation and their lack, those who are without land, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for the kind of world where everyone is included, not just the rich and the powerful. Jesus wants a community that reflects the heart of God.

Earlier in the sermon, I said that what I have really grown to appreciate in Micah's words today is the vulnerability that God brings to the table, the honesty and the authenticity with which he operates as he deals with the controversy that he has with his people. The God of Micah is not detached from life and from the struggles. Some of the Greeks when they talked about God described God as the "Unmoved Mover." This is not the God of Micah or of most of the Old Testament prophets. The God of the prophets is passionate, is involved, lays it on the line, allows love to become truth telling, asks for the people to respond and gives them opportunity to do so.

God is not some "Unmoved Mover" who stands at a distance. As a God of passion and involvement, this God is a God of vulnerability. Passion and vulnerability often go together. He wants to be in relationship. He wants the relationship to be taken seriously.

Paul tells us today that the center of his proclamation—and can I say ours—is the cross, that is the vulnerability of God. The center of

what we have to say to people is something that doesn't make much sense to the world. In fact, it turns the world upside down. God is not to be discovered in lofty places, lofty thinking, amazing miracles. God is to be discovered in a dying man on a cross. God is discovered in an ordinary, suffering man. Ultimately, you see, life is not about status, achievement, accomplishment, money, or popularity. Life is about the suffering heart of God, the vulnerability of God.

No wonder, then, that what God wants from us is not religious accomplishment or achievement or status, but hearts, minds, and relationships that are oriented toward the God of the cross, the God of the vulnerable. No wonder, then that what he wants from us is to do justice, love kindness, and walk attentively and humbly with God.