

Micah 6:1-8
I Corinthians 1:18-31

The Wisdom of Lip Service?

In the past Thirty years, I have been to court maybe 15 times. This is not the beginning of a confession. I have been in court to support friends and neighbors and to support Members of the churches I have served. Sometimes I have been a character witness and sometimes I have been on hand simply for prayer and presence. Once I was a witness. Despite the cynicism there sometimes is in our nation; I believe we have many reasons to be proud of our judicial system. It's not perfect and there are biases and cultural prejudices that need to be exorcised and or improved, but by and large it works. It delivers fairness and thereby creates peace and certain kind of justice. The courtroom is one of the few places I have ever sat in a pew that was not a church. If you are lucky enough to be there at the beginning of the session, then you get to witness a secular sacred moment. The court official precedes the judge. He says something like: All Rise, All matters and persons having business before the honorable circuit court of Anne Arundel County, draw near and give your attention. The court is now in session. The Honorable Judge John Doe is presiding. Most

of the judges I have seen in court or met in person have a certain presence and wisdom about them.

This morning with the prophet Micah we enter the courtroom. In a vivid and somewhat intimidating scene the people of God are subpoenaed. We are summoned to court. We are called in to stand on the cosmic carpet. The foundations of the earth shall be our witnesses. The mountains listen as we plead our case. For God says, I have a controversy with you My People.

This drama in Micah is very powerful. It is ominous to be called to court by Judge God. Our worst fears about the Old Testament are about to be realized. Soon we will be fried by lightning bolt and flattened by earthquake, squashed like a bug. But after the prophet Micah explains that we are in court, Judge God surprises us. God does not yell angry or lash with whip. God is hurt. God's voice is cracking with emotion and choking with disappointment. What Have I done to you? I have rescued you time and time again and still you deny me. Still you forsake righteousness. I brought you out of slavery and you forget.

Micah was a gifted teacher and preacher. Micah was a man of prayer and compassion. Micah was a prophet who listened for and

heard the true voice of God and Micah has a complaint to carry to the people of Israel and all people of faith. Micah, on behalf of the creator, drags the people of faith into court. In those days, it would have been at the gate of the city - in front of the elders. With a poetic flare Micah declares the mountains as witness and the charges are laid out. Malpractice. The people of faith are guilty of Malpractice. Micah charges us with lip service. We fail he says to promote fairness and Social Righteousness. We have let things get out of hand and unbalanced. The powerless are squashed. Good is hated. Evil is loved and the skin of the people is ripped from their backs.

Words from this Prophet Micah have made a major impact on Public life and our understanding of Social Justice and Righteousness. When Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as president he took his oath of office on a Bible opened to our scripture passage from Micah. In 1959, the Soviet Union presented to the United Nations a bronze sculpture of a man beating a sword into a plowshare, a symbol of the universal hope for disarmament and peace. On the base of the nine foot sculpture are words paraphrasing Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4 "we shall beat our swords into plowshares. When we celebrate Christmas, we O Little Town of Bethlehem by Phillip Brooks, which picks up words

from Micah 5:2 But you , O Bethlehem Ephrathath, who are one of the little among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule Isarel. Justice, Peace and Messiah: Though the Book of Micah is little itself among the Prophetic writings, it deals with these great biblical themes. ¹

Micah stands firm for the promotion of Social Justice and Righteousness. Micah drags us to court, God more hurt than angry confronts us and then in scene three of the drama, we the people reply. We have a great idea, we will bow before God. We have another spectacular idea and will come to worship with some burnt offerings. They sacrificed meat; we bring offering envelopes and use Electronic Funds Transfers. Then we the people get carried away – we almost sound like we are bribing God. How about thousands of Rams God? How about a boatload of oil, you can even have our children. This is the clue that we don't know what we are saying. Child sacrifice is abhorrent and one way that Israel showed its superiority over neighboring primitive cultures, was to condemn their acts of child sacrifice. This is the literary clue that Micah thinks the people have lost perspective. The way the Apostle Paul puts it, is that sometimes the

¹ Micah by James Linberg, John Knox 1988 page 159

foolishness of the world is promoted as true wisdom and the deep pure wisdom of God is denied, because the people trust in deep foolishness of culture and society.

I am certain that the last person I would like to face in a malpractice suit is Judge Creator. Imagine God suing us for mere lip service and our failure to truly live out our faith, not many of us would win, not any of us. Micah was so upset about what he saw in Israel, that he wanted to drag the people into court for failing to follow God's covenants. He was particularly disturbed with the wealthy who took advantage of the poor. He had a vision for true peace.

Think about it for a minute - If we did know that a possible suit was coming our way from a divine prosecutor, we would probably scurry about and try to put things into quick order. We might increase our pledge for a few weeks. We might volunteer for a few extra projects around the church, go on a habitat build, serve dinner at the Homeless Shelter, sing extra enthusiastically during the hymns, maybe even be real nice to our families for a month or so. If we were going to court to face God, we just might try anything that could soften up the Big Maker in the sky.

Micah tells us that this kind of panicked or contrived behavior to influence the mind of the God is really a waste of time. Ritualistic bribes and flash in the pan acts of faith don't carry much weight. Micah brings us to court, God addresses us, we reply by trying to wiggle our way out of malpractice and then Micah speaks again. He has told you O Mortal what is Good. Micah doesn't choose to call us people, he reminds us we are mere mortals.

God knows all about lip service and empty motions and God remains unimpressed. Its not that God doesn't want worship or offerings its that God wants us to go deeper farther and more earnest. Micah tells us that what the creator really requires of us is that we do Justice, Love Kindness and walk humbly with our God. No empty gestures but a true commitment. No robotic Christian copycat behavior, but discipleship. Micah's case is this, the people too often wish to play church and substitute pretend pious attitudes and synthetic ceremonies for discipleship, for real and risky discipleship. "This response only reinforces the pattern of showy religiosity that Micah has already condemned, especially from leaders who look to their own interests (3: 11). Micah would expect such false leaders to turn first to conspicuous acts of sacrifice, as though the problem is

appeasing God rather than changing their own behavior. Micah makes it clear that there will be no more business-as-usual in the religion department without a change of heart and life.”²

The question is rhetorical. What does the Lord require of You? Israel already knows what is required and so does the church. Salvation is not saving up Christian brownie points in the Bank of God, for use on rainy days; its embracing discipleship. It is Turning our hearts and souls toward God and responding as our faith leads us. Thus the prophets' call for Israel to do justice and to love steadfast kindness is not a call to human chores to appease an accusing God. God's call to us through Micah is much larger than that. God's call to us is to change a world with our changed hearts. With transformed hearts we carry God's dream into the world. Oh ya, honor your parents, love your neighbor as yourself, do unto others, turn your cheek - that's almost the easy stuff, because God wants us to love a stubborn and reluctant world into a state of humbleness, justice and kindness. Imagine that, God wants us to work on the world as well as our hearts. The Promotion of Social Righteousness means we move

² Amy Oden at Working Preacher.org

our faith from the living room to the soup kitchen, from the closet to the whole Habitat House.

The pastor up and Brown Memorial Presbyterian church remarks that to do Justice, love Kindness and Walk humbly with God is the bumper sticker version of the Judeo Christian Ethic. In a sentence, it is perfect description of discipleship. Walking humbly with God – we could call that spiritual formation leads to kindness in the family, the school, the workplace the church and community from which we work for true justice in the nation and in the world.

Kindness, Humbleness and Justice means we don't accept One Billion Hungry people. Desmond Tutu is the retired the Arch Bishop of the Episcopal Church of South Africa, but in 1983 when he was a priest in the forefront of the Anti - Apartheid movement in South Africa I heard him preach and he said, "God is not neutral when an elephant sits on the tail of a mouse." I'd like to see Speaker John Boehner and President Barrack Obama have a public conversation about a Billion hungry people. The meaning of justice goes way beyond handing out the right penalty for the right crime. Justice is setting things right in the world. Justice is giving up luxury until no child in the world goes to bed

hungry. How many of us had a tough decision about desert last night – the ooey gooy chocolate thing or the tuity fruity parfait.

No says God, what I want is for you to treat each other, and that's all of each other, with the same kindness with which I treat you. I want you to love this kindness and embrace it for your own life, in your discipleship. This is steadfast kindness my people, real "stick with it" loyalty, goodness, fairness and caring. Spare me the occasional show of civility and adopt steadfast kindness as your model.

Too often in the church we forget the promotion of social righteousness. Our vision for creating justice in the world is too tiny. We want to make pretty cookie cutter disciples for Jesus who sing nice songs. We want to preach the Good News. We want to protect our children. We want to comfort people and be comforted – you know spiritual nurture and formation. The prophets and Christ Jesus are there – they are all about Spiritual Formation, but that's not where they stop. Micah says the rich fix the scales, seize land from the poor, mistreat and ignore children, widows, the sick and powerless. When the Spirit of God was upon him Jesus said that he was sent to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to blind and to let the oppressed go free. Jesus was against economic slavery. The words

of Micah and Jesus cannot be spiritualized and domesticated for that would be lip service and foolishness.

Our greatest challenge is that we are comfortable. We adopt the wisdom of the world, the culture and we are blind to its foolishness. Micah on behalf of God indicts the people for tolerating these unkindness and injustices. God is not neutral. Silence is consent. The powerful and evil commit sins of action and the people commit sins of omission. God knows what's going on and God calls us to change it. Its great that we had 112 people volunteer for winter Relief and people each month that volunteer at Sarah's House and Habitat; but if we are dragged into God's court will it be enough? I don't have the sense that Judge God is threatening us with Hell. I do have the sense that out of pain God looks at the world and the church and is saying what the hell is wrong with you people? I have loved you, stop the lip service and Go out and love. With kindness and humbleness, go out and create true justice.