

“To Act Justly”

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It's an interesting week to bring this passage to you. On the one hand, I recall from our listening sessions and the survey responses that, if I were to bring up something involving politics, some portion of you would stop listening, one way or the other. It is a difficult thing to engage. On the other hand, we have an issue before us that churches have been responding to and I, essentially, just want to get this out of the way before I preach. I'm not going to make a statement on the issue that has been coming before us of children being separated from families for those who are coming to our southern border. But I will say that should you be interested in such statements, there is a statement by the president of the Southern Baptist Convention calling for that practice to end, there is a statement by the United Methodist Church condemning it and calling for that practice to end, and there is a statement by the Presbyterian Church (USA) that you can easily Google and find, calling for that practice to end.

But it is a similar context to what we see in this passage. In Micah - in this book - Micah has been describing what is coming to the people of God. And, it is a difficult thing that is coming. Then we get to this passage and it's a court story. It's a scene of God and the nation of Israel standing in court together. It's not the kind of court that I'm familiar with, watching Judge Judy, or a modern American court. We have to leave our conventions and go to a mostly pre-literate time to get a sense of what they are doing here. Back in this day, in all of the cultures around them, my simplistic understanding of contract and court disputes, were that they regularly happen among the elders at the city gates. You will see that mentioned in Scripture repeatedly, and it looked like this: If I wanted to buy a plot of land, I would go and make a deal with my partner, and I would go with my partner to the city gates to meet with the elders, and they would all be witnesses to this deal that we make. So, in the future, should we get into a dispute about what the deal was, we could come back and have it presented at the city gates again, and these elders would determine what was true, because they remembered the agreement that was made in front of them.

This is what you need to do if you don't have a county recorder. We don't, at this time, have a document that can be written out and given to Polk County Recorder to capture where your house is. The way that things were recorded was by the communal memory of the elders at the city gates. This is how one brings a dispute in this court, and this is what God is doing here in Micah. God is calling on witnesses. As the passage begins, you can hear him say, "Rise up and plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord and your enduring foundation of the earth, for the Lord has a controversy with the people of Israel."

The problem is, the agreement that was made outlived any generation. He is calling back to the covenant the relationship that was knit together between Abraham and God, when Abraham took a bull, a ram, and a goat, and split them in half and walked down between them. Then God, in a dream, brought a flaming smoking pot between them, which was this pledge of a promise. "This is our agreement between us," he was calling to the mountains. "Remember when we made this agreement together. It is time for you to listen to how this is working out and judge between us."

In this passage, Micah has called Israel to account for their wrongdoing. And, what was their wrong doing? There are many things that the people of God did wrong. It is, frankly, somewhat demoralizing to read the history of the kings of Judah and Israel, because it seems as though as soon as it was politically expedient, they replaced the Temple of God with some other religion to help bolster their political power. They were constantly turning their back on the God of Abraham and Sarah. This was not about that. It was not about them turning against the worship of God. It was how they were treating the people in their midst. In the chapters earlier - in Micah 3 - Micah condemned them for giving judgments for bribes. In Micah 2, God condemned them for the practice of seizing the fields of those without power around them.

This is difficult to get our heads around. We live in a time where the rule of law is just taken for granted. No one can just seize a property without some government agency doing something about it, but that wasn't always true, and it is not a guarantee in a futile culture. There was a TED Talk in 2015 that describes how this is happening here today - not in America, but in some other cultures, without the strength of the rule of the law.

Greg Haugen, in 2015, described meeting with Venus. She was a widow with three kids in Zambia. She walked 12 miles, he said, in the only garment she owned, to describe her story about the lack of justice in her life. She described when the last of her cooking oil ran out. She described watching her youngest son Peter suffer from malnutrition until he was cold and still. When he [Haugen] asked how this happened, she told the story that after her husband's untimely death they were doing fine until Brutus, the neighbor, threw them out of their house, stole their land and robbed their market stall. Without a husband or family protection, she had no recompense. She had no way of protecting her family [and providing] the livelihood they needed. The brute force of an evil-doer simply grabbed what they wanted.

Micah, in chapter 2, describes the same thing: In Israel, those with wealth would dream at night, dreams of taking things they wanted. And, they would wake up in the morning, he described, and go about taking them. And, in this rule of law, the king and the king's counterparts were obligated to make something happen; to stand up for the widow and the orphan, against those with power. Instead they took bribes - they gave judgments to those who could line their pockets. So, after hearing the woes that were coming on their nation, they asked Micah, "What can we do that would appease God? Is it thousands of rams? Is it rivers of oil (as kings and other nations around them had them done)? Should we sacrifice our own children?" Certainly Abraham, or those in the Jewish story, never actually did that, and God never actually desired, or asked for, or allowed the sacrifice of children.

What is it that God wants? And Micah said, "You know what God wants. It's not your sacrifice. God wants you to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

This passage was the theme verse for our Mission Team going to Minneapolis, and they sought to understand how to live this out. What does this mean today "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God?"

You heard from the four in our Moment for Mission, describing what it was like to meet with those who did not have what we have. They had an opportunity to experience poverty,

to hear stories of those in poverty and perhaps most importantly to hear how difficult it is to escape poverty; how expensive poverty is and how many challenges there are to rising above it. Entering into this, our host at Urban Immersion gave us an opportunity to learn how to budget. We became families and did two things: One, we had to learn how to find affordable housing in Minneapolis. We had to learn how to get child care and to get transportation to two hourly jobs - and it was extremely difficult. None of us successfully did it. And, most of us were struggling to find cheaper housing, because there just was not enough available in this simulation.

As my son Liam shared, we had a simulation for what it is like to live on the Minnesota program of SNAP, the feeding program for those in need. We had \$1.19 per person, per meal. Our team went to Target. We really wished that we were the team that went to Aldi's. [Laughter.] Target - not Super Target - just the regular Target was a difficult place, but part of what we were experiencing was, you don't always have a choice to which store you can get to. So the six of us went, and found also spaghetti. We were lucky enough to find a small enough package of ground turkey, so we had meat sauce in ours, and we were required to have a fruit. They didn't have any fruit sold [in] small enough [packaging] or vegetables, other than the spaghetti sauce. We had a bunch of bananas, because the bananas were sold at 29 cents apiece, so we could make that work. We didn't have enough cash to buy more than that. We all brought it back and the kids were kind of experiencing how difficult it is to live on this. We could do it for a day and it was kind of fun to make it a challenge, but when we came home Liam said, "Let's do this at home. Let's figure out how to do that." But, he also said, "It would be hard to try to do this every day" - to live this way, and not have the variety - to be so constrained.

We heard from Cynthia. Cynthia is a program director at one of the social agencies helping people with homelessness, but she told her story - I think about a 25-year-long story - of how she was in poverty; how she didn't go to the streets when her brothers did, but she married someone who became a drug dealer. And how she repeatedly tried to leave him, and he would find her, and gather the kids up, pull her with them in his nice car and bring them home - four times over. Finally a hit was put out on his life and they left to the country. She thought they had escaped the danger of drugs and [then] she found out he was dealing there. Finally [Cynthia] had a friend teach her how to leave for good and she ended up in a Minneapolis homeless shelter, a shelter for abused women and their children. She described what it was like to get out of the shelter. What it did for us was it put a face and a story to this reality. We know that there are shelters like this, but we don't know what it's they are actually like.

There are these other people we never encountered. You heard Riley telling about sitting with the social worker, helping a man find housing. In the same store - we were at a free store - we were sorting clothes and bringing them out on a rack, and people would come and ask us, and there was a circle of guys in their 20-30s, three or four of them who, every time I would come out, they would come up to me and see if we finally found any men's pants in their size, so we could bring them out to them. We met with them and engaging them and then we sought to act. As you heard, we packaged about 3000 pounds of potatoes to be sent out to food shelters, and we made enough fortified rice meals to take 17 children out of malnutrition and feed them for a year.

We went to a food shelf that had been particularly helping retired people, and our job that day was to take 40-pound bags of pet food and break them down into 5-pound bags. We asked, "Why are we giving out pet food?" and she said, what they found was these elderly adults had companion animals and they would feed them the human food we would give them. It wasn't good for the dogs and they [the retired people] were not eating the food the shelter was giving them, so the shelter got a donor and they give them pet food.

We went where we met neighbors of elderly homeowners who couldn't take care of their own yards, who were telling us stories about how they try to check in with these elderly people, and they thanked us for doing the spring cleaning for these folks - in this one case, as Parker mentioned, so they wouldn't be fined by the city for breaking the code.

I recall Payton carrying 50-pound buckets of dirt as we cleared a weed field, so we could lay mulch at the women's shelter, so they could have a home to escape their abusive husbands. And, finally, the youth were challenged to use their voice to hear what the story was, and to speak out on behalf of those whose voices were not being heard. This is what your team did that you sent out to Minneapolis.

They were ambassadors of Heaven. They went out in their simple, playful, fun ways and they brought the Kingdom of God. They brought shining lights of Heaven wherever they went. They gave dignity and solidarity. They heard stories seeking to right the wrongs they encountered.

This is who we are: We are the people of God. And we raise children to be the people of God. And we seek to bring God's aid to the world around us. This is what it means to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.