

6-7-2020 SERMON CCI Micah 6. 1-8 What God Expects

It's been a rough couple of weeks. We watched the video of George Floyd being murdered at the hands of police officers, many of our cities filled with people grieving and protesting Mr. Floyd's death, the looting, vandalism, and violence by anarchists that followed. We watched police use tear gas on peaceful protesters and force a priest off church property so the President could have a photo op at the church where the priest served, watched police officers push an elderly man to the ground and then walk off leaving him bleeding on the sidewalk, watched police beating protesters with their clubs, and protesters throwing rocks at police. Grief and anger everywhere. What is the church of Jesus Christ called to do at a time like this?

Our scripture reading from the prophet Micah opens in a courtroom scene, but it's not criminal court where the purpose is to determine who is guilty and then assign punishment. It's family court, where the purpose is to seek reconciliation between people who are estranged from one another. And we learn that God's people had become estranged from God. In worship they said all the right things. But during the week, they were giving and taking bribes, ignoring of the needs of the poor, the widow and the orphan. Their courts were corrupt and everyone turned a blind eye as long as they got what they wanted.

God had a beef against Israel. What have I done to deserve such behavior? He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, had given them leaders, brought them to the Promised Land, protected them from people who wished them harm like Balak. The people knew these stories of their history with God.

And they began to squirm. They offered to do extravagant things to get God off their backs. How about 1000's of sacrifices, God? Or 10,000 rivers of oil, or how about sacrificing my own child? Is that enough for you, God? What do you want from us, God?

And what does the LORD require of you?

To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Powerful words for that time and the time in which we are living.

Do justly- We've heard the word, justice, a lot the last 2 weeks. *No Justice, No Peace. Justice for George Floyd. Equal Justice Under the Law.* Justice is about doing what is right, what is fair, what is lawful. We are to **do justly** in our dealings with others- being fair to one another, doing what's right in each situation. **Do justice.**

But Micah and the prophets see doing justly as more than personal, they make it political- standing up for the rights of others, especially the poor, and holding leaders accountable. The prophet Jeremiah linked working for justice to faith, with what it means to know God:

"He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well.

Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD." Jer. 22:16

Even Jesus was political when it came to justice. He healed people on the Sabbath because it was right even though it was prohibited, he spoke against using unjust scales that

cheated people, and legal practices that left widows and the poor out in the cold. He stood for justice even when he ruffled powerful feathers. Doug Avilesbernal calls justice “disruptive peacemaking” because there is no real peace without justice, and there is no justice without disrupting unjust thinking and ways of being.

But God knows that left to ourselves doing justice can look like the agitators in the crowds last week screaming profanities at the police. Our doing justice is to be tempered by mercy. The Hebrew word *hesed* translated as mercy also means kindness and compassion. A rich word of many nuances. Caring for other’s needs with kindness, mercy. Like Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan who cared for his enemy after he had been beaten nearly to death. He didn’t walk by leaving the man lying there bleeding. He saw the man as neighbor, created in the same image of God as he was and he acted on his neighbor’s behalf. *Hesed* leads to action. God calls us to show *hesed* regardless of race, religion, culture, financial status, or any other difference we allow to divide us.

And more, we are called to **love** mercy. Not see it as a burden, but to love the privilege of being kind to others, showing compassion. Not looking down on those who need help. Giving as we would want to receive because that’s how God gives to us. Loving mercy makes us generous. I remember listening to an announcement at church one Sunday inviting people to give to the Food Bank- “It won’t cost much to help,” the person said, “just look in your cupboard and give the food you don’t like anyway or is outdated.” That may be giving, and it might qualify as doing justice because the needs of the poor are met, but it wasn’t **loving mercy**. In fact, it didn’t require loving at all- just dumping.

In our day of deep division, God is calling us to temper how we do justice with **hesed-mercy**. To balance two values that seem to contradict each other. Justice where people get what they deserve and mercy where they get kindness they may not deserve. Some of our personalities fit better with doing justice- with strong senses of fairness, we like holding people accountable and following the rules. And others among us have personalities that lean on the loving mercy side- soft-hearted and helpful, even if taken advantage of. Justice people get called hard-hearted by mercy people and mercy people get called soft on responsibility by justice people. But God doesn’t let us choose the one we like better and ignore the other. God calls us to live in the tension of both/and- doing justice AND loving mercy.

That balance is hard so the third requirement is essential- walking humbly with our God. We often think of being humble as keeping our head down, thinking less of ourselves, not being proud. And humility does have the sense of being modest rather than arrogant. Humility is finding our rightful place rather than demanding the best place. Seeing ourselves as God sees us- no more and no less. Jesus said humility was a key attribute of faith. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.” (Matt 18:4) and “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matt. 23:12) Walking humbly with God is a lifestyle that follows Jesus’ pattern.

The word, humbly requires paying attention, listening, not assuming we already know. In times like we are living now, there are many people speaking loudly- with their voices,

rocks, tear gas, Molotov cocktails, signs, and their feet, shouting, screaming voices. We need humble people who will speak up, but also listen. The issue needing to be faced right now is race and racism. It's so easy to speak without listening. How long has it been since we spent time listening to a black parent describe what it's like to be black, how they have to teach their sons to keep their hands in full sight on the dashboard if they get stopped by the police so they don't get killed? How it feels to be followed by security in a store, or get paid less than white people doing the same job. Listening humbles us. I was talking about racism with a black ministry colleague once and I told her that I did my best to be colorblind and not see race at all. (I felt good about that attitude) Then she looked me in the eye and said, "What? My black color is like a wart on my nose so you can't look at it?" It was humbling to realize what my wanting to be colorblind meant. If we want to walk humbly with our God, we need to really hear our neighbors.

For most of us in this congregation, being out on the streets protesting is not an option due to physical health, or the risk of being infected with COVID 19. But we can still do justice with mercy and humility- have you completed your census yet? We can write or call civic leaders to let our Christian voice be heard. Vote. Join a prayer vigil online. When we are out and about, or on facebook, we can speak up about things we hear that are unjust. Praying before we respond, so our response is tempered by hesed. Minds don't open when we react with anger or disrespect. Even small, simple things matter- we have a sign in a window at our home saying "Do we accept murder in plain sight? Justice for George Floyd!" And Friday as I was weeding a flower bed, a woman walking by said, "I agree with your sign." Our brief exchange strengthened both of us. Whatever we do, we must not be silent.

We belong to a group of Baptists with a strong history of standing with those being denied justice- we stood against slavery, we marched for voting rights, stood against putting the Japanese in camps and more. The church of Jesus Christ faces another prophetic moment now over race. What does God expect from us? To be God's voice in the chaos by **doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God**. Will we stand again?