

“The Word in Public”
Micah 6:1-8
Rev. Andrew Connors
4th Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2023

If Christian ethics had to be summarized on a bumper sticker, Micah 6:8 might just be the perfect choice: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” There may be no better summary of the neighborly ethic voiced by the prophets, codified in the commandments, and incarnated by Jesus Christ. At a time when attention spans are shrinking the Church may well benefit from catchy, “purpose-driven” creeds that articulate the fullness of the faith in the length of time it takes for a cell phone to ring. Some of you have told me that this is one of your favorite Bible verses - justice, kindness, obedience to God’s way - it’s what the Christian life is all about.¹

But there’s a danger in a kind of bumper sticker faith plastered on the shirts we wear without any kind of more detailed explanation. Consider that this text was read at the funeral of Senator Jesse Helms, a public official in my home state of NC who ran racially charged campaigns, voted against civil rights, and rarely voiced poverty as a legitimate political concern. When I watched the funeral service many years ago what was lifted up about Senator Helms was how he stood up for what he believed even when it was unpopular. Is that the kind of justice that Micah is talking about? Or consider Matt Taylor’s research into the New Apostolic Reformation that played such a central role in the Trump administration including in the January 6 insurrection. You can follow his research on the podcast *Straight White American Jesus*.² The New Apostolic Reformation is a spiritual oligarchy, as Matt has called it, a group of self-described Apostles who answer only to each other (because they say they are answering directly to the Holy Spirit), prophesying all kinds of things they say God wants from us - like anti-abortion activists on the Supreme Court driven by a vision of Christian supremacy that they believe is exactly the kind of justice that God wants to see in our nation and in other governments around the world. They probably love this scripture, too. How do we contend with that?

For a long time, I think church communities like ours turned away from scripture and toward more modern, humanistic disciplines to defend our notions of justice. Diversity, equity and inclusion comes to mind - an ethic removed from any kind of

¹ Several sections of this sermon are taken directly from my own article published in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, volume 1, “Pastoral Perspective.”

² Dr. Matthew Taylor, “Charismatic Revival Fury,” on *Straight White American Jesus*. The best way into the podcast from this sermon manuscript is to see the outline of the series on the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies’ website - <https://icjs.org/charismatic-revival-fury/>

religious grounding. In the abstract there's nothing wrong with that. I mean if we had to choose between getting our scriptural interpretation right or stopping another police beating like the one that just killed Tyre Nichols in Memphis, I think God would say get into the streets today. We can read scripture later. If we had to choose between getting our theology correct, or stopping all the killing from gun violence here and around the country, I think God would say to those peacemakers who give it their all, well done good and faithful servants. I'm certainly not opposed to calling on the best of our human wisdom, expanding knowledge and ways of thinking and working in our pursuit of better defining what God wants from us and acting on those definitions to make the world a better place.

But as the divisions grow in our country between those with a college degree and those without, I don't see all these secular arguments winning many new converts. What I see is the authority of those secular visions for the common good being called into question by people who are appealing to the scriptures interpreted by this elite spiritual oligarchy for their authority. And the more churches like ours retreat from engaging scripture, theology, and our Christian tradition to describe the world as it should be, the more our children retreat from faith as an important foundation for defining the common good and working with others to create more of it in the world. It's a vicious cycle - If our tradition isn't progressive enough to describe a world that is more loving, just, and caring, why would you stick with it? If our holy writ is on the side of those who carry an anti-democratic, Christian supremacist vision of the world, we should all reject those all texts from the past in favor of the loving, just, and caring vision of our future that we believe God wants to see regardless of what the Bible or our tradition says.

But, in fact, *the danger in handling today's text is not in going deeper into it, but in skimming the surface*. Skimming the surface, you can make justice, kindness, and humbly walking with God mean anything you want. You can make forcing your way into Nancy Pelosi's house and hitting her husband over the head with a hammer out to be "justice." You can make trying to overthrow an election and allying yourself with white nationalists to kick and beat police officers who are protecting the lives of people that we elected to office out to be walking obediently with God. You can make kindness mean never confronting bullying behavior without a greater understanding of what kindness means.

The prophet's appeal today emerges from a critique of religious people who throw around their piety without ever doing anything with it to address the socioeconomic inequities that are tearing their nation apart. The voice of God condemns a community that has learned how to talk religious-speak without walking the walk that it demands.

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" the prophet asks. Burnt offerings? Calves a year old? Thousands of rams? Ten

thousands of rivers of oil? My firstborn? Micah's answer, of course, is that none of these symbols of sacrifice pleases God. God desires more than words and actions in worship that have been emptied of their meaning. God desires justice that is measured by how well the most vulnerable fare in the community, a loyal love ("hesed") that is commensurate with the kind of loyal love that God has shown toward Israel, and a careful walking in one's ethical life.

How do we know that's what this text actually means and not just something that a person like me in a position of authority has made up for his own benefit? By going deeper into to the text itself to visit the courtroom scene where God puts the people on trial. The powerful "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away" (2:2). They "tear the skin off my people" (3:2). They send violence on the poor (3:5). The political leaders take bribes, and the religious leaders sell out for money. (3:11) By the time Micah poses his rhetorical question in v. 8, you can't get away with a definition of justice as vague as Jesse Helms' "doing the right thing," you can't dismiss talk of economic inequality as godless liberalism, either. It's right here in the Word of God.

And I know that a lot of us are people who are focused on taking actions that make us more obedient to this vision of justice defined by how well the least among us fare. All the energy that I've seen supporting some of our neighbors - the Afghan families who have come to our shores looking for a new home. All the energy that many of us are putting into launching BUILD's plan to address the vacants - years of my life and the lives of many of you pushing toward a public unveiling in a couple of weeks. All the energy that some of you have put into slowing down climate change and preparing for the worst of it. I wouldn't change any of that.

I just think it's past time for those of us who haven't given up on all religious institutions, or said more positively those of us who see immense value in what the church brings to our lives and to the life of the world - it's time for us to get more public with our ways of reading scripture, our ways of interpreting our tradition, our ways of engaging the public sphere for the common good. Not being intimidated into shrinking from appeals to scripture to defend what we believe is God's vision for belonging and inclusion for everyone. Not being bullied into relinquishing God-talk when speaking of our spiritual call to do justice in the world. Not running away from explicitly religious appeals to the common good because we have subconsciously adopted the view that those appeals are exclusionary by nature.

We need to step into the vacuum that was created by progressive leaders afraid of religious language and texts in the face of the emergence of right wing religious approaches that are inconsistent with text and tradition, and demonstrate, instead, how desperately that language and those texts are needed to evaluate the unholy alliances that we are experiencing between the gun industry, right wing media, white nationalists and elected officials whose vision of power is nearly the opposite of Micah's vision for the common good.

How do we do that? Well I've got some ideas, but I'm not 100% sure - it's why you elect elders to pursue God's vision for the world and very intentionally not rely on one person like me. We don't trust the idea that God speaks to a small group of people at the top and everybody else falls in line, the theological idea that prepared the soil for democracy itself.

What I do know is that the work that we do in this room - the worship of God through singing and listening to and questioning and being questioned by the Word of God - is way more important than most of us have probably considered it to be. What we do in that room every Sunday after church and in the Bible study on Wednesday and with our children in their classrooms and in your personal devotions is way more important than just helping you get through the day or make personal decisions. It's weaving a fabric of people not only who pursue God's justice but know how to define it from, and articulate it in the church's native language.

May we keep learning that language, keep studying it, keep teaching it to our children not only for their sake but for the sake of justice, and kindness, and faithfulness to God's hopes for us and our world.