

Justice and Mercy in Response to God's Grace

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, June 10, 2018

Evensong, on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 4:1-16)

Micah 6:1-8 (NRSV): Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

1 Corinthians 4:1-16 (NRSV): Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.

This morning I preached about receiving God's Grace. The readings this afternoon address our response to God's grace.

Paul writes to the Corinthians for several reasons, especially to address their unity in Christ. It seems that they are dividing into factions. Some factions are built around leaders in the church, including Paul himself, as well as Apollos, another preacher known to the church in Corinth. So Paul encourages them to get rid of these factions between them.

He writes that he and Apollos are merely stewards of God's mysteries. To compare the two is really up to God's judgement. Neither Paul nor Apollos has anything about which they can boast—only they can boast of God's grace. Paul writes about all the suffering and humiliation that he and Apollos have as apostles, so the Corinthians should much rather boast in Christ, not in Paul or Apollos and certainly not in their own gifts or works.

Paul writes "what do you have that you did not already receive? And if you received it, why do you boast, as if it were not a gift?" Paul wants them to respond to God's grace with the work of

reconciliation. Reconciliation in the church is most especially important, that we see and treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, together and not divided in factions. This is part of our good stewardship, not just to be stewards of God's truth in doctrine, but also good stewards of God's truth in action as well.

Our Old Testament reading has something to say about truth in action as well. The Prophet Micah issues this message to us about our faithful response to God's grace. Micah brings a well-known message about justice and mercy and kindness as our response to God.

First, Micah makes the case for God's grace to Israel. His examples aren't that well known to us, but the stories about slavery and Moses and Moab and Baalam all have to do with God's grace and favor to Israel, helping them when they were slaves, poor, weak and foreigners in the land. Then Micah moves from God's grace to what God requires in response.

Micah writes "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." The children of Israel were slaves, then foreigners in the land, and they were not worthy of God's mercy. But God made them his people, and he gave them a new land by his grace and mercy. God calls them to respond by also showing grace and mercy.

This passage is well known, and it is often a battle cry for social justice. In the verses that follow this reading, Micah echoes other prophets as he challenges the people for their lack of justice in business, in law and in the way they treat each other. Micah challenges the way the people 'show up for church' and make their sacrifices, and yet they do not honor God in their daily lives. What are those sacrifices worth if they are not truly faithful to God? The people defraud the poor in the marketplaces by using dishonest weights and measures. They charge high prices to the poor. They mistreat the foreigner traveling in their land. Micah and other prophets are rightly seen as champions for social justice.

So Micah and other prophets have a lot to teach us about pressing against racism and prejudice, about support to the poor who have few advocates, and about honoring the foreigner and stranger, and standing for truth against corruption. Especially when we have the privilege of being part of main-stream society, and when we have citizenship and wealth, God calls us to respond to his grace and mercy by caring for those who don't have a voice, or whose needs are easy to overlook.

So yes, Micah does call us to social justice. But there is more to this passage than we might notice at first. Sometimes the loudest voices calling for social justice have a dogmatically Marxist edge. Sometimes this passage is used to convey a message that "*what God wants is not religious devotion, but rather social justice,*" by which they mean good works that don't mention God or that don't consider Christian standards. But this would be a horrible misreading of this passage.

In the verses that follow this passage, Micah also strikes out against idol worship and following other gods. Micah joins other prophets who call on the people to tear down idols from their cities and houses, and return to the one true God. The justice that Micah preaches is God's justice. Indeed, what we think of as social justice is a value that we learned from God and God's call to his people to be faithful to him in how they live their lives.

The words that Micah uses are worth examining. Micah writes “do justice and love mercy.” The word for justice is *mishpat*, the word for “judgment.” Another way to render this phrase is to say “judge rightly.” That feels like a different spin in those terms, doesn’t it? Justice isn’t just a particular cause, justice is about doing the right thing for everyone, and the right thing is known by knowing and following God.

The second word is even more compelling. Micah writes to “love mercy.”¹ The word translated “mercy” in this case is a little more complicated. It is the Hebrew word *chesed*. This word is sometimes translated “loving-kindness” or “steadfast-love.” *Chesed* means covenant love and faithfulness. *Chesed* is the faithful and merciful love that God has for us. It is mercy, and it is more than mercy. It is love and it is more than love. *Chesed* is the love that God has for his people, whether they deserve it or not. *Chesed* is the love that is based in the covenant that God makes with us. God says “I will be your God and you will be my people.” And faithfulness to each other in that covenant is *Chesed*.

So when Micah writes to judge rightly and love *chesed*, this is not a secular program, devoid of religious meaning. Indeed, it is entirely religious in nature. This is about sharing the love and justice and mercy of God. This is about turning away from other gods and being faithful to God alone. Walking humbly with our God is about responding to God’s grace and mercy with our faithfulness to God and in sharing that same grace and mercy with the world around us, in word and in deed.

So we hear a strong call in each of these readings about how we should respond to God. We should not respond in factions, not in self-serving practices in business or law. We should not turn away from or neglect the needs of the poor, the foreigner and the stranger. This is the faithful response to what God has done for us.

Be sure to catch the basis for these messages. Neither Micah nor Paul is saying “you better get this right so that you are worthy of God!” No, in fact, neither Micah nor Paul see these issues in terms of self-improvement. In fact, it’s not about us at all; it’s about God. Micah and Paul present these exhortations as a response to God’s grace.

Micah says essentially ‘*remember how God had mercy on you? Remember how God was faithful to you (even though you didn’t deserve it)?*’ Paul says essentially ‘*we can’t boast in ourselves. It’s not about Paul or Apollos. It’s not about us at all. It’s about Jesus Christ and his grace and mercy toward us.*’

These responses of reconciliation and justice and mercy and steadfast love are all empowered in us when we receive God’s grace. If God has been so faithful and generous to us, then surely we can be faithful and generous to others as well. To be stewards of God’s grace is first of all to take joy in receiving God’s grace. And from that receiving, we find we have plenty of grace and mercy to share with others. May God strengthen us to respond to his generous gifts, and to share those gifts with others.

¹ The NRSV uses “love kindness,” but the translation “love mercy” is so well known from the King James Version and the NIV, that it is worth addressing.