

“WHAT MATTERS TO GOD: JUSTICE”

Scripture lesson: Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 12:10-21

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“**W**hat does the Lord require of you?” The prophet Micah asks. What is it that God wants of us? Some would argue that God wants us to believe certain things. Ascribe to a particular theological formula – the Four Spiritual Laws or the like. Or, there is a certain prayer we must pray, in a certain way. A certain church you have to belong to. A certain way to be baptized. What does the Lord require?

The answer that the prophet Micah gives is a bit surprising for those of us raised in Protestant, evangelical Christianity. “What the Lord requires of us that we do JUSTICE, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” The Lord requires that we do justice, Micah says.

But use that word today, and you will stir up some people. Dave Barnhart, one of our associates, works with a group from our Annual Conference that is tasked to help us think about and act on social issues – things like gambling, drinking, hunger, poverty, protection of children, women, those without power. Someone evidently gave his name to a woman who is not a member of our church but who called Dave one day to angrily denounce the very idea that the church would be involved in issues of social justice. It was none of our business. We should be sticking to the business of saving souls not getting messed up with social issues.

Dave says it was obvious that she was channeling the voice and opinions of a popular national radio-TV commentator who has railed against Christians who give voice to issues of justice in our society. He labels them as un-American and un-Christian. In fact, he tells his listeners that they should leave any church that talks about social justice.

The problem with that is not only would you have to leave the church you would have to stop reading the Bible! It’s not just in Micah that we read about justice. Matthew’s gospel uses a quote from the Prophet Isaiah to describe the ministry of Jesus: “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.”

- Psalm 72 declares: “He will do justice to the afflicted of the people; he will save children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressors.”
- Proverbs 21:3: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to God than sacrifice.”
- Exodus 23:2: “You shall not deny justice to the poor.”
- Deuteronomy 10:18: “He executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the foreigner, in giving him food and clothing.

Far from being something that is somehow peripheral or alien to the Bible, justice is one of its central themes. It is one of the things that matters to God.

Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian who founded the Sojourners community, remembers a time in seminary when he and some friends took a Bible and cut out all the passages having to do with God’s special care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the stranger, those who were on the outside looking in. The result of this experiment? There was hardly anything left, justice was indeed the thread holding the whole narrative together. The Bible makes it clear that

justice matters a great deal to God. How life is ordered in this world matters to God because people, all people, matter. What happens to people in the here-and-now as well as the here-after matters to God.

The key question that used to get asked a lot by those wanting to convert you, when I was growing up, was “If you died tonight would you go to heaven?” I understand the intent of that, the sincerity with which it was asked, but the question itself has a way of shifting the focus of biblical faith, making it one dimensional, other worldly, taking the focus entirely off this world. Which isn’t biblical.

It’s what slaves were told to keep them in line. Anderson Edwards was a slave born in 1844 in Texas. He became a preacher. “I been preaching the gospel and farming since slavery time. I joined the church 'most 83 years ago when I was Major Gaud's slave and they baptizes me in the spring branch close to where I finds the Lord. When I starts preaching, I couldn't read or write and had to preach what Master told me, and he say tell them coloreds iffen they obeys the master they goes to Heaven.”

Promise them heaven to make them forget about the misery of their existence on earth. But Edwards went on to say: “But I knowed there's something better for them, but daren't tell them 'cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tells 'em iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free.”

Edwards knew there was more to the story than the here-after. He sensed that there was something in the Bible that was freeing, radical, subversive of slavery.

And so did the slave owners. From records of that time, we know that on the list of things that slaves were forbidden to do was to read. Sooner or later all of the southern states made teaching a slave a penal offense, subject to prison. For the slave who learned to read or write, amputation of fingers and whipping with cow hide lashes was the standard penalty. Specifically slaves were not allowed to read or even to talk about the Bible! Imagine that. What possible harm could there be in reading the Bible? Lots, if you were in power and held others in bondage.

Slave owners knew that if slaves could read, sooner or later they were going to read the words of Leviticus: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.”

Sooner or later they were going to read the story of Exodus. They would read how God heard the cries of his people in Egypt and sent Moses to demand of Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” They would learn that the God of the Bible is a God of justice.

The Exodus was the single most important event in the history of Israel; it was the originating moment for them as a people. The misery of the Hebrews was based upon their economic exploitation and social degradation. They were victims of injustice. And notice what God does to address this injustice. He doesn’t tell the Hebrews to get used to it, be patient and their reward will come later in some other realm. He doesn’t address their distress with the time honored means of giving to the poor by the means of charity. What God does is to remove them from the situation. He leads them out of a system that was unjust.

Walter Breggemann, an Old Testament scholar, says that the Exodus story makes it clear that God is committed to the establishment of concrete justice in a world of massive power organized against justice. “God is here known to be a resilient, relentless advocate of and agent for justice....” He hears the cries of the oppressed and moves to their aid.

That’s exactly why the powers that be forbade slaves from reading the Bible. Not because it was too other-worldly, but because it was very much this worldly. “What does the Lord require of

us, to DO JUSTICE. God is a god who goes messing with things that are not right. A god who frees slaves, takes the side of the powerless. A god who does not abide injustice. A god who cares about the here and now!

The God of Jesus in whose life, death and resurrection the kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven. When Jesus teaches us to pray “your kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” notice the direction. The flow is not from here to there, from down to up, from earth to heaven, it is from there to here, up to down, from heaven to earth. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham and a leading New Testament scholar, says that the central message of the gospels is that the creator God, Israel’s God, has come at last to reclaim the whole world as his own in and through Jesus of Nazareth. This is the meaning of the kingdom of God. In Jesus, God confronts all the unjust structures, all the tyrannies of this world with the news that God’s justice is breaking into this world to rescue and restore the world to genuine humanness.

The death of Jesus came at the hands of a political establishment interested only in preserving power by suppressing justice. But, in his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated all the forces of tyranny and ushered in a rule of healing justice. In Jesus, God has arrived on the public stage and is not about to leave it again. “I will put my Spirit on him and he will proclaim justice to the peoples.”

Someone has said that justice is what love looks like in public. Already in the actions of Jesus, we see what justice looks like. When Jesus reaches out to include the outcasts – the lepers, the disturbed, women, children – those on the margins of society – that’s what justice looks like. When he tells his disciples that they are to feed the hungry, that’s what justice looks like. When he heals the sick, those whom the world had given up on, that’s what justice looks like. When he refuses to use his power for his own benefit, that is what justice looks like. When he refuses to back down in the face of power, God’s will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

There is a line in the old gospel hymn “Precious Name” which talks of Jesus as the “hope of earth and joy of heaven.” Both of those are true. The gospel is about hope for earth and the joy of heaven. The Christian hope is for renewal and coming together of heaven and earth which has begun in Jesus.

That coming together is continued through us. To be a follower of Jesus is to do as he did – to enact justice in the world. What does the Lord require, to do justice. For Micah, and for Jesus, justice was not an abstract idea. It was not something that you just talked about. It was something you did. When we are in relationship to this God of justice, then we begin to see what matters to God. When we see what matters to God, then we begin to see the injustices, the tragedies, the atrocities of our world. But justice is more than seeing, it is doing.

Author and social critic Os Guinness tells of the time when the queen of the Belgians was visiting Poland while Poland was still under Communist rule. Everywhere she went she was accompanied by a guard of the secret police. Since she was a Catholic, she often attended mass. On one occasion, while she was kneeling in prayer, she noticed that the guard standing beside her was moving his lips and saying the prayers. She was surprised and asked him, "Oh, are you a Catholic?" to which he responded, "I believe but I don't practice." She asked, "Then are you a Communist?" to which he answered, "I practice, but I don't believe."

In biblical religion, belief and practice come together. Heart and mind and behavior are in concert with one another. Justice, mercy and walking with God are intensely personal but they are also social.

Another thing that scriptures make clear is that the practice of justice should move beyond the requirements of the law. When we think of justice, we think of Judge Judy, the courtroom. It is a legal term for us. We go to court to balance the claims made between parties. Justice is determining who is innocent and who is guilty. This is a kind of procedural justice.

In scripture, justice is more substantial, it involves creating the conditions where basic needs are met, where the rights of people are insured, where systems are held accountable for how they treat people. It has to do with the structures of a society. With creating the conditions so that all people have the opportunity to enjoy the bounty of God's goodness and grace.

And, sometimes, that means taking on the powers that be. It means speaking that prophetic of justice how-has-your-day-been word to our society. It means taking our cues from this God, so that what matters to God matters to us.

Tex Samples is a colorful Methodist preacher/teacher who grew up in Mississippi in an environment that was not altogether righteous. When he was in the first grade, his Sunday school teacher was a man he called Mr. Archon. He was the only legitimate millionaire in the town. He had a certain way about him, he never told anybody what to do, but, if he asked, people would break their necks to do it. He had a style that made you want to please him. A certain charisma and education, and yet, about once a month he would teach those first grade Sunday School students, that colored people were not fully human, that they were actually condemned by God in scriptures and that segregation was God's way. Tex was taught that in Sunday school for over a year.

It just so happened that in that church was a woman named Miss Hattie Bowie. You didn't call her Hattie or Miss Bowie, it was the whole name. She had been a missionary in Korea for 30 years from 1909-1939 when the Japanese kicked the missionaries out. She came back home to Mississippi as an older woman taking up residence in Tex's church.

Tex says he doesn't know how she did it. She could not have survived a face to face confrontation with Mr. Archon. She never took him on publicly, but it seemed like every time he taught a racist study, somehow, Miss Hattie Bowie would get across to them with something that must have been a whisper, but later seemed like thunder, "It isn't true! It isn't true!" She would take them to her house and show us these dolls from Korea and these wonderful intricate paintings, and she would teach them to sing, "Jesus loves the little children (all the children) of the world. Whether yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight."

Tex says that Mr. Archon took God's story and put in a racist story. He subverted it and used it to justify something that was not of God. But Miss Hattie Bowie took the racist story and put it in God's story and dissolved it.

What does the Lord require of us? We need to get the story straight. In the church, we must be sure that it is God's story we are telling, and not selling God's story out to some other story. "What does the Lord require of us but that we do justice, love kindness and walk humble with God."