



“Step into the Courtroom”
Scripture – Micah 6:6-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 29, 2017

If you wanted to destroy community, how would you accomplish it? How would you sever the bonds that connect us to each other so that we would be isolated from one another?

More than 30 years ago, author Howard Snyder posed this question and “offered the following strategies: fragment family life, move people away from the neighborhoods where they grew up, set people farther apart by building larger houses and yards, and separate the places people work from where they live...partition off people’s lives into as many (separate) worlds as possible. To facilitate this process, encourage everyone to have their own car. Replace meaningful communication with television, cut down on family size and instead, fill people’s homes with possessions. The result? A post-familial, disconnected culture where self is king, relationships are thin, and individuals fend for themselves.”¹

In his groundbreaking book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam has shown that in the past three decades, we have become increasingly disconnected from our family, our friends and our neighbors. Families eat, play, and learn together less frequently, neighbors do not know each other, and people belong to fewer organizations. Whether it’s the Rotary, the PTA, the church or synagogue, people are not committing to organizations as they once did. The name of his book, *Bowling Alone*, comes from the fact that more people are bowling than before, but there are far fewer leagues. People are joining together less than ever.

When community breaks down and excessive individualism reigns, it reinforces a mindset of “Us versus them,” and the fabric of society frays. Greed gets a foothold and the neglect of others becomes standard operating procedure. It was to such a community that Micah prophesied.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that the prophets of ancient Israel had a twofold purpose: they chastised and they energized. The prophets were not light-hearted chaps quick with a joke and eager to entertain. With clear and uncompromising commands, they condemned the status quo. The divide between the wealthy and the poor had grown too extreme, and the haves were ignoring – if not oppressing – the have-nots. However, the prophets did not simply criticize and threaten; they also reminded the people what God expected.

Micah lived in the eighth century BCE, and he prophesied as a visionary poet. In today’s passage, what some have called “The Golden Text”² of the Old Testament, Micah paints the scene of a courtroom in which God is the prosecutor and the people are the accused. In delivering his prophecy, Micah alternates among the roles of narrator, the people and God.

He begins as the mouthpiece of God, inviting the people to state their defense. “Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.” That is, shout out your argument so that all creation can hear you. But rather than trying to create fake news or alternative facts, the people recognize their guilt and are wise enough to remain silent.

When they do not try to justify their behavior, God could drop the gavel and declare the verdict: “Guilty!” However, God does not seek punishment, but rather the restoration of their relationship. So, God says, “What have I done to you? I liberated you from slavery in Egypt and gave you leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”

Has their memory slipped or do they take their past good fortune for granted? Perhaps they imagine they have accomplished it all on their own and forgotten God’s hand in their good fortune.

After reminding the people what God had done for them, the prophet switches roles and speaks for the Hebrew people who recognize their culpability and desire to know how they can return to good standing with God. Articulating what the people are feeling, Micah asks: “With what shall I come before the Lord?” In other words, how we can make things right? And they begin to suggest possibilities.

Note how Micah begins modestly, but then starts escalating what the people think might be necessary to return to the good graces of God. First, “Shall I come before God with burnt offerings and calves a year old? In ancient Israel, these were routine sacrifices to God. Yet, without waiting for a reply from God, the prophet ups the offering dramatically: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?”

That must have startled his audience as they strained to imagine a sacrifice of many times more rams than even existed in all of ancient Israel. Before they can even grasp the sight of thousands of rams, he presents an even wilder exaggeration. “Would God be pleased with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?” This was the prophet’s way of saying: Does God desire all the tea in China? All the gold in Fort Knox? A thousand times Warren Buffet’s portfolio?

As the people stagger under the enormity of such an impossible offer, the prophet slyly shifts away from his hyperbole of wealth to what is even more precious than vast material riches. He says, “Shall I give my firstborn?” Shall I give God what is even more precious than my own life?

At this moment, Micah surely has everyone’s rapt attention. No one takes a breath as they await God’s answer. Finally, Micah asks, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God?”

This is the prescription for a vital and thriving community. Individualism breeds selfishness and selfishness paves the road to greed, ill-will, distrust, and division. Walking humbly with God creates an altogether different dynamic. When we walk humbly with God, we seek a rich spiritual life. And a life close to God becomes aware that every person matters because each is a child of God. If each of us is a child of God, we are connected to each other, and expected to look out for one another. We are one family. I do not want what is best for me at your expense. I want both of us to thrive.

Jesus was surely channeling Micah’s instruction to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God when he called on us to love one another. The primary calling of the church is to show the world the change God has made in our own lives by loving one another and by sharing God’s love with those beyond our walls. This love is not simply an emotion, neither is it empty rhetoric to mouth only on Sundays.

It is a Christ-like caring in our soul that cannot be contained, but must express itself in concrete actions. Jesus revealed that authentic love is willing to make sacrifices – like the mother who will do anything for her child, or the soldier who will risk his life for his friends fighting beside him. Are we able to love with such love?

Presbyterian minister, Michael Lindvall, shares the story of a minister he met who served in the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. “For more than 30 years, Fuad Bahnan served a small Presbyterian congregation in the overwhelmingly Muslim area of West Beirut. In 1983, during Arab-Israeli fighting, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon. No one knew how far they would go, but the members of Bahnan’s church believed that the Israelis would take Beirut and then try to starve out any Palestinian fighters still in the city. So the session of his church decided to stockpile food for the siege to come.”

“When the Israeli army cut off West Beirut, no one could enter or leave and no food was allowed in. The session of Bahnan’s church met to make arrangements for distributing the food they had stockpiled. At the meeting, the elders weighed two very different proposals. The first idea made good sense. It was this: the food would be distributed first to members of the congregation, then, as supplies permitted, to other Christians in West Beirut, and if any was left, to Muslims. The second proposal on the table was this: the food would be distributed to Muslims first, then to non-member Christians, and lastly, if there was any remaining, to members of their church. It was extravagantly kind and altogether counter-intuitive.”

Reverend Bahnan said that the session meeting lasted six hours. It finally ended when an older, deeply respected and usually quiet member of the session – a woman – stood up and said, ‘If we don’t demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?’ The second motion passed. The food was distributed first to Muslims, then to other Christians, and then to members of their own church.”

[I’m not sure what I would have done if faced with that choice. I might have gone with the first proposal.]

After all, it was our food and we were the ones who had the foresight to stockpile it. Charity begins at home and all that.”

[More than 20 years later] “When the Lebanese pastor told the story, he added two footnotes. First he said that the Muslim community of Beirut is still talking about what their church did. Second, he said that there was actually enough food for everyone.”³ I would say it was modern day “loaves and fishes.”

Westminster has a solid record of generosity, so it is not a stretch for me to imagine our session making a decision to provide for the needs of others before our own needs. We open our building to at-risk children so they can excel in school and develop Christian values. We provide a meeting room seven times a week for people struggling with addictions. We feed people who are hungry and build houses for people who are homeless. We visit people who are ill, drive people to the doctor, and send our love beyond our borders.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God? This is the mission of our church. We are to take God’s blessings of health and wholeness to a hurting world. And we are to do it with sacrificial love.

NOTES

1. Charles E. Moore, “Introduction,” *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People*, (Walden, New York: Plough Publishing House), 2016, p.xv.
2. W. Sibley Towner, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, p.295.
3. Michael Lindvall, “Kind or Right,” June 12, 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Justice and Mercy, who dwelled among us as a humble babe that we might behold your boundless grace ... Since the dawn of time, you have enfolded us with your love and sent us to bear your blessing to the world. We know what you require of us ... and we strive to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Yet, we live in a world that is far from just ... a world that desperately craves kindness ... a world where it is so easy to wander from your path. So we turn to you, O God of Grace, for comfort, for guidance, and for hope. Illumine our minds and transform our hearts that our vision may be *your* vision and our ways, *your* ways.

Some of us come with hearts that are burdened with grief or weighed down by fear. We worry for family and friends, for our community and our country, for neighbors in need throughout the world. We remember those for whom nothing is certain — neither food, nor shelter, nor security — and pray that you would fill them with persistent hope. We remember those in every land who are denied dignity and who suffer discrimination, and pray that you would uphold them with your love. We remember those who are imprisoned by illness or addiction, and pray for your healing in body, mind, and spirit. We remember those who are anxious or grieving, and pray that you would surround them with peace.

Most of all, we ask that you would work in and through us — and *all* people — to be instruments of your hope, your love, your healing, and your peace. Teach us the ways of justice, O God, that we might continue your holy work, until all creation experiences your wholeness. Teach us the ways of kindness, that we might be a balm in this hurting and hostile world. Teach us to walk humbly with you, that we might follow you faithfully in *all* things, and bear your blessing to others.

We lift this prayer in the name of Christ, our Lord, and join our voices as one to offer the prayer he taught us:
Our Father ...