



“Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly”

Scripture – Micah 6:1-8

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, November 17, 2019

When my sister and I were growing up in Tulsa, kids had a great deal more freedom. My neighborhood friends and I would jump on our bikes and ride blocks away from our street without a drop of anxiety on the part of our parents. On Halloween, we went “trick-or-treating” at dozens of houses and received treats from numerous strangers and never gave it a second thought. My father worked for the same company his entire life, mass shootings were unknown, and the words “opioid crisis” were never uttered.

Our society has changed a great deal in the past few decades and the pace of change is constantly accelerating. As changes occur, I suspect most of us over 50 are aware that we have lost something. It is tempting to pine for the “good old days” even when those days were not quite as wonderful as in our memories which often cull out the bad and idealize the good. In my childhood naiveté I imagined that every kid in town experienced life as I did. It would be a few years before I recognized that Native Americans, blacks, Hispanics, and Jews faced prejudice I never encountered. There are still some things from the past I would love to recover, but I also know that there have been good changes in society I would not want to relinquish.

Numerous factors make societies fluid rather than static. Advances in technology have created new jobs and eliminated old ones. Trends in arts and entertainment influence the way people think. Another significant impact on society is immigration.

Today, wars, gang violence and climate change are forcing millions of people to flee their countries or die. Throughout history, people have migrated to new places to escape persecution, famine, and poverty. These are reasons many of our ancestors reached these shores and set the stage for us being born here. Of course, many were brought here in bondage.

However, with a global population of 7.7 billion people, and growing by 80 million a year, more people are migrating than ever before. When these immigrants enter other countries, it changes the make-up of societies. Today, most western nations are comprised of people from all races and religions, multiple languages and traditions.

In our country, we are involved in a bitter debate over our nation’s immigration policy. There is a stark divide over the direction we should take and many people feel torn emotionally. Many wrestle with an internal conflict between sympathy and fear. On the one hand, they feel compassion for people who suffer. On the other hand, they are fearful of the stranger. It does not help when public figures speak of *illegal* immigrants. People are not illegal. They may be undocumented immigrants who have entered the country illegally but dehumanizing people

is an affront to God who creates each person in God's image. Myths and outright lies about undocumented workers also whip up irrational fears.

It is estimated there are 65 million refugees in our world. The great majority wish they could live and thrive in the country their family has lived in for generations – the familiar place they have called home since birth. However, violence and extreme poverty have forced many to face a choice which really is no choice: stay where it is familiar and almost certainly perish or risk finding a new place to call home.

I do not know the correct number of refugees our nation should embrace. But I do know that separating children from their parents and refusing entry to people based on the color of their skin or the name of their religion are sinful.

With a handful of exceptions, we are American citizens simply by accident of birth. We won the lottery when we were born in a democratic nation with checks and balances on power, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. Some may say, "Too bad for others" and may want to slam the door on immigrants. But that is not an option for disciples of Jesus.

People who call Jesus "Lord," need to be part of the immigration conversation to counter those who are fearful and prejudiced, because Jesus and the prophets expect us to treat others the way we would want to be treated if we were in their situation. If we have even an ounce of faith, we need to spend time in prayer asking ourselves: What would we do if we lived in a country that forced our young boys to become child soldiers? What would we do if there was a strong possibility that our wives and daughters would be raped? What would we do if famine had destroyed the crops and our children were starving? What would we do if we lived in a nation that allowed men to abuse women with no fear of repercussions? What would we do if, as in Syria, *our* nation's leader sent the military to kill dissenters?

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, a whopping 68% of white, evangelical Protestants say that it is *not* our nation's responsibility to accept refugees. Those who pride themselves on a literal interpretation of scripture seemed to have skipped over the prophets and ignored some of the words of Jesus.

In the Book of Exodus we read, "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner." (Exodus 22:21) In Leviticus, we read "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born." (Leviticus 19:34) The prophet Jeremiah said, "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner." (Jeremiah 22:3) Jesus said, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35).

Today our series focuses on the prophet Micah. Like the prophet Jeremiah, like the prophet Isaiah, like the prophet Amos, like the prophet Hosea, Micah declares that our worship means nothing to God – is actually an outrage to God – if we turn our backs on the vulnerable.

Micah tackles a concern on the mind of every believer: What does God expect of us? He says, "With what shall I come before the LORD? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with young calves?" Micah jumps to outrageous hyperbole: "Will the LORD be pleased with *thousands* of rams, with *ten thousands* of rivers of oil?" Then, to become right with God, to cancel one's sin, he says: "Shall I sacrifice my firstborn child for my transgression?" As his audience is gasping at the thought of child sacrifice, Micah spells out God's expectations. "God has told you what is good. What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

First, to do justice. Last week I mentioned that in the Bible, there are some passages in which justice refers to administering a deserved punishment. However, the typical meaning of justice refers to treating people fairly and

with dignity. Isaiah defined justice as “rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow.” When Jesus and the prophets spoke of justice, they usually meant caring for the most vulnerable. In the scriptures, the word “justice” and the word “righteous” are often coupled together to emphasize that justice means doing what is right. Those who seek to reduce the Christian faith to little more than banning abortion, stem cell research, and gay marriage, may be startled to learn that Jesus and the prophets called on people of faith to right wrongs and elevate those who are beaten down.

Second command: to love kindness. Prophetic spirituality is not mean-spirited. It recognizes each person as a child of God and approaches each man, woman, and child with compassion and goodwill rather than fear and anxiety. We need a wise, compassionate, and just immigration policy. We cannot simply let everyone who wants to come to the U.S. to enter, but putting people in cages is surely not the answer. Painting immigrants as rapists, murderers, and terrorists is not the answer.

When we approach someone who is different from us – whether because of race, religion, sexual orientation or identity, economic standing, country of origin, or some other difference – do we approach them with fear or do we approach them with an interest in learning more about them? Getting to know people from different races, religions, and cultures can broaden our perspectives as well as be a check on our prejudices. Hearing the stories of people whose stories are very different than our own, can help us deepen our understanding of human nature and the ways God’s Spirit is active throughout the world.

Third command: to walk humbly with God. With what temperament do you approach a stranger? Anxiety or Calmness? Dread or Joy? Arrogance or Humility?

Donna Hicks, a Harvard trained conflict resolution specialist, was invited to facilitate an interfaith discussion in New York City two months after 9/11. The group included Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. Most of the morning session, which was designed to clear up misconceptions, was proceeding well until a man who was a Christian minister became embroiled in a disagreement with a woman who was a Muslim religious counselor. The dispute centered on an interpretation of Islamic law.

The two were sitting at opposite ends of a large oval table and the argument heated up. Finally, the Muslim woman leaned forward and said, “Are you telling me that you know more about Islam than I do? Are you telling me that I should go against all that I have learned and accept your interpretation of Islamic law?” The minister shot back in a condescending tone, “So you think you’re the only one who knows about Islamic law? I happen to know quite a bit about it!”

The woman pushed her chair back from the table and said, “It’s hopeless. I cannot have this kind of discussion if I’m not respected for who I am and what I know.” A tense silence permeated the room for several seconds until one of the facilitators called for a break.

While everyone was nervously getting coffee, Dr. Hicks saw the minister pacing in the back of the room, head lowered, and his hands in his pockets. After five minutes, everyone reassembled around the table and the minister asked if he could speak first. People gripped the arms of their chairs. He sat quietly for a moment, then folded his hands on the table, looked at the Muslim woman and said, “I want to apologize. Of course you know more about Islam than I do. *I* should be the one who learns from *you* about Islamic law. You need to know that I am a recovering chauvinist and I have to work at taming my male superior attitude every day. So, please – I ask your forgiveness.” The Muslim woman had readied herself for another attack and his apology stunned her. She took a deep breath, then, calmly said, “I accept your apology.”

When the minister took responsibility for what he had done, he brought his best self forward. Hicks writes, “Apologies do not happen very often. The need to save face is one of the most primal aspects of our evolutionary

legacy. It often holds us back from doing what a part of us knows, deep inside is right. It takes great strength to fight the impulse to save face and admit we are wrong. The fear of looking bad in the eyes of others is nearly insurmountable...But the minister went from looking and sounding arrogant to becoming noble in their eyes.”¹

Prophetic spirituality calls on us to take an honest look at ourselves and to admit when we are wrong so that we can make things right. Whenever we approach the issue of immigration and other controversial issues, may the straightforward words of the prophet Micah emerge from the depths of our being: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly.

NOTES

1. Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 89-91.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Justice and Mercy — 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 have fled their homelands to escape violence or persecution and to build a better life in a land of opportunity, and pray that they might find refuge and welcome. 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, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.