

A Walk on the Spiritual Side

The Lectionary texts for Christmas and, to this point, Epiphany have focused on God's transformative power and God's extravagant grace. Today's texts turn a corner. The transformative power and God's gracious intervention expect and arouse a response from God's people.

Today I'm beginning a series of three sermons on the text from Micah. Micah lived in the time of Isaiah and Hosea in the southern kingdom, (Judah), and Amos in the northern kingdom (Israel). The writings of all these prophets is clear: the people of Israel have not taken seriously the expected response to God's activity in their midst.

Instead, they have adapted the religious practices of the surrounding cultures: burnt offerings, calves, rams, oil, and in at least one instance, the sacrifice of one's eldest child.

The Books of Moses, called the Pentateuch—the first five books of our Bible—seem clear that God asked; indeed commanded, these acts of worship, plus a complex system of liturgical observances and incantations and holy days.

But today's text from Micah leaves no doubt:

Micah 6:6-8 (NRSV)

“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?

⁷Will 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?”

⁸He 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?

Micah isn't the only one who spoke of God's passion for justice. The prophets Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the apostle Paul carried the word of justice in their hearts. They spoke it, they pleaded, they begged, they stormed and scolded, they wept. They thundered the word of justice from the mountaintops, they whispered it in the valley of dry bones, so that the people they loved, the people God had given into their care, might understand. Listen to Amos:

Amos 5:21-24 (NRSV)

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

It's tempting to interpret these prophetic claims to mean these sacrifices and liturgies are still valid, but Israel just isn't doing it right. But Jeremiah, 150 years later, is unmistakably clear. In his famous "Temple Sermon," he proclaims:

Jeremiah 7:22-23 (NRSV) "...in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. ²³ But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you."

"If any group on earth should have been sensitive to God's passion for justice among peoples, it was Israel. They knew through their own history what it's like to be unfairly treated, to be used, to be victims of prejudice and bigotry.

And yet, throughout their history, whenever they got "the upper hand over their neighbors or over one another, they had to be reminded that God wants justice for all people. They loved the idea that they were God's chosen people, but too often misinterpreted that as being chosen to rule the world rather than to be God's servants *in* the world, to *bless* the world."

If you spend any time on social media, you know that "some of us citizens of the United States suffer that same delusion of grandeur. It can be inferred, from our own national mythology, that America is the new 'promised land' and that we are 'chosen people.' To whatever degree that may or may not be true, I am quite certain that we, too, are chosen to serve rather than to rule. Given the fallen condition of humanity, any sense of 'divine chosenness' quickly and easily deteriorates into arrogance and justification for all kinds of injustice.

"So, God continually was calling prophetic voices to remind the people of Israel that the passion for justice is at the very heart of God's self."

It's amazing how quickly we shift from longing for justice to expecting mercy. Neither of those things is hard to understand. The challenge is to practice both at the same time.

"So, what is justice? As individualistic North Americans, we tend to think in terms of *criminal* justice: 'If you do the crime, you do the time.' This thinking lines up with one kind of biblical justice: "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Ex. 21:24). It's repeated 107 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. But Jesus categorically renounced it: '*You have heard, eye for eye, ... but I say... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...*'

As a biblical people we must dig deeper. As the Bible uses the word, there is more to justice than the punishment of individuals who break the law of God or the laws of the land. I often have said and written that justice and righteousness share the same root word in all the original languages of the Bible.

I've lost the source of this quote. Just know that I'm using someone else's words here: *"biblical justice means we follow God's way to make right that which is wrong, and we look to Scripture to define what is "right". We do not have to look far to see that Jesus is our standard of right (and justice)."*

Paul Louis Metzger, theology professor at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, writes this, concerning biblical justice:

"In our post-Christian setting, many skeptics view religion as corrosive, divisive, and a source of injustice. But the kind of religion the Bible advocates is rooted in justice that flows from the heart of God. It seeks to bring all things into the wholeness of God. As those justified by faith in the God of all justice, we are to experience the wholeness that he brings and extend it as citizens of (God's) kingdom."

In Matthew, "Jesus taught that the weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy, and faith (Mt. 23:23—you do see, I hope, the direct correlation with Micah's "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God."). Thus, the Mosaic law was not intended as a mere pietistic formula for staying in God's favor. It was given as a web of connection with the living God." ¹

A final point: it is crucial to understand that biblical justice is related, not just to individuals. Biblical justice also includes *systemic* or *social* justice. There are systems that inhibit justice, there are systems that promote justice, and there are systems that suffer injustice. By definition, that makes justice political; but biblical justice is not partisan. It is not Republican or Democrat or Libertarian. Jesus lived and died so his people might understand that justice, mercy, and faith are woven into and emerge out of the heart of God and thereby define the deepest layers of spirituality.

Maybe you've heard or read about **Tom Cousins**, the big developer in Atlanta, and a strong churchman. During the mid-1980's—he redeveloped the old East Lake district in Atlanta, built around a golf course. He redid the golf course, but the housing around it had become a center of crime and drugs. He got permission to bulldoze all that and to build new housing. The whole idea was not just to rebuild housing, but to change the way people think about life, especially the young people. In the old housing project, the only model of success the kids ever saw was the drug dealer who came around in a stretch limo, parking at the corners and making his sales. And did he have the money, did he have the money! All those kids saying,

¹ Throughout this sermon, passages in quotes are *paraphrases and adaptations* from Richard Hamm, *2020 Vision*, p.59ff

"Now there is success."

The new project is intentionally inclusive. There's a white family on welfare, and next door there's a working Hispanic family—nurse, doctor, school-teacher, police officer, insurance sales person—and then you have a black welfare family, then a white or maybe an Asian working family, another welfare family, another working family; and the children were seeing people successful and not dealing drugs, holding up a different image before those young people.

Some other communities and some individuals have used their resources—their gifts and abilities—in similar ways, following the model established by Tom Cousins. In doing so they acted to administer Justice: "*to follow God's way to make right that which is wrong.*"

And that's one very tangible expression of what it means to "be Spiritual."