

November 13, 2022: THIS DAY'S SERMON

Readings: Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 9:13

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Let us pray: *God of Justice, you sent your Prophet Micah to proclaim justice and peace to a world that lacked both. Make us instruments of justice and peace, that your world might prosper. We pray this in the name of the one who gives us new life, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

On this Veterans Day Sunday, let us take a moment to pause...and breathe...and acknowledge all those who sacrifice to make our freedom to gather—to speak this morning of justice—possible.

What does the Lord require of us but to do justice...What is this justice that our God demands of us? I have to wonder how capable we are of truly understanding what justice means And how do we understand what justice is without personally experiencing it. It seems so easy to take for granted all that we have when it's always been readily available to us.

I'd like to take a moment this morning to consider those for whom it's not so accessible. Last Monday, Pastor Phil and I took some time to watch a movie called "Loving". Set in the south in 1958, it tells the story of a young couple living in a small town in Virginia who fell in love. Out of that love, a child was conceived, an acre of land was purchased, and a dream for the building of a home and a marriage was born.

The couple, with the bride's father as their witness, traveled to Washington, D.C., and they were united in marriage. Richard and Mildred, now husband and wife, return to Virginia, where they settle with Mildred's family, saving money from Richard's job as a construction worker for the building of their home and the birth of their child.

Midway through their pregnancy, their dreams and their sleep are disrupted; they're awakened by loud voices, followed by the sound of breaking glass. The door bursts open and the County Sheriff orders the couple out of bed and into two waiting squad cars. In separate vehicles, Richard and Mildred are transported to the county jail, where they're placed in separate cells to be held until they can be seen by the magistrate for the crime of interracial marriage.

You see, even though Central Point, Virginia was more integrated than surrounding areas of the south, interracial marriage was still banned in 1958 in the State of Virginia. Although the couple had been legally married in Washington, D.C., to live together as husband and wife in their small town remained a crime.

Arrested, jailed, and eventually convicted through their guilty pleas, Mildred and Richard are banished from the State of Virginia. Forced to leave their families, they settled in Washington, D.C.

The story of their fight to return home to Virginia to raise the three children they would eventually have in the home they dreamed of building would become a landmark case in the history of our country.

As their case, *Loving v. Virginia*, prepares to go before the Supreme Court, Richard Loving is asked by their attorney if there's anything he wants the Justices to know. His response was simple: "Tell them that I love my wife."

That statement, bound together by the Loving's story, articulated by the arguments of their attorneys, would be enough for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule that laws banning interracial marriage violate the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Some nine years later, Richard and Mildred were finally able to build the home of their dreams.

This story is just one example of justice in the legal sense of the word. But is this the justice that our scripture speaks of this morning? Justice in the world of the Prophet Micah was grounded in brought to life in the Hebrew word *mishpat*.

By definition, in Judaism, *Mishpat* = Justice. And Justice = Equality. It means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights. *Mishpat* is giving people what they are due, whether that be punishment or protection or care.

Having sat in the Minnesota Courts for 30 years, I understand the concept of justice from a legal perspective. In terms of what Richard and Mildred experienced, I'm challenged to understand justice from the perspective of being able to freely love the person I've fallen in love with without threat of violence or jail because I've always had that right.

It seems that God's imperative in Micah is that of restoration. The text from Micah which Dick just read for us is the people's response to the covenant lawsuit God has brought against his people earlier in the sixth chapter of Micah. They have broken the promises of their relationship with God by failing to care for the creation around them; turning, instead, to the use of sacrifices and burnt offerings in their attempt to honor the relationship.

Through the Prophet Micah, God lays out all that is required to honor this relationship:

Do justice: The verb here doesn't require us to simply appreciate or enjoy justice when it comes our way. We're commanded to "do" justice; to actually make it happen. In our personal relationships, in advocating for our community, for our nation, for our world, we are required by God to

actively pursue the making of a just society.

Love kindness: The Hebrew word for kindness is *hesed*. That word exceeds our common understanding of kindness. The idea of *hesed* is that of persistent, unflagging loyalty, like that God has continued to show Israel. It is the deep sacrificial love that Richard and Mildred Loving demonstrated towards each other. For Micah, kindness goes much deeper than being nice. It pushes us into the realm of lasting, meaningful relationships.

Walk humbly with your God: This phrase points to journeying with God. The requirement of walking humbly with our God calls us into an ongoing relationship with God that affects all that we do.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel posits that “a religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times; who suffers harm done to others; whose greatest passion is compassion; whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.”

All of this calls us into right relationship with God; and to be in right relationship with God is to be in right relationship with each other. The “Justice” Micah speaks of here is one word: Justice. It is not “**JUST US**”. It’s more than attending a worship service. It is an ongoing orientation and way of life that prioritizes the well-being of our neighbors. Without justice for everyone, how can there be justice for anyone?

Now, I appreciate that this can all feel very overwhelming when we look at the need around us. With all that we see happening, it can seem like nothing we do can make a lasting difference. The thing is, God doesn’t call us to do everything. God implores us to do something. No action on our part is so small that God can’t use it to move us towards the just and whole world that God desires.

The Good News here, expressed through both the words of Micah and Jesus, is that what God desires from us is within our capacity to provide, not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does. Every step we take, regardless of its size, when done with love and humility, kindness and grace, will break open the heart of the world, even just a little, resulting in us edging ever closer and closer towards the justice God dreams of.

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is not easy. This is not a matter of “all we have to do is…” If it were that easy, our world today would be a much different place than it is.

To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God requires us to be honest with ourselves and with God. It demands that we look at ourselves, our world, and one another with unfiltered lenses; and respond to what we see and hear with intentionality and commitment to bringing justice and fairness and equity into the world.

To do that requires us to confess that what is just another day in paradise for us does not equate to a day in paradise for everyone. To bring justice into this world, we are called to listen and to see and to respond by caring for those who are marginalized and speaking on behalf of those who have no voice because paradise, in its truest sense, cannot—and will not—happen until justice is experienced by all of God’s creation, in all places, at all times.

Micah reminds us that God does not desire that we bargain. God desires that we look at the world around us and dream of what it can be. God desires that we commit to that dream; and that we live into it as we journey together in our earthly experience. When we walk together, with our Creator and each other, sharing our experiences and our dreams, we can and we will bring justice to bear in this world, for this world, for all people, for all time.

Amen.