

Ellisforde Church of the Brethren

2-2-20

Micah 6: 1-2, 6-8

Matthew 5: 1-12

The Politics of Jesus: Micah and the Beatitudes

Micah 6: 1-2, 6-8

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth;

for the LORD has a controversy with the people, and will contend with Israel.

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸ God 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?

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sometimes we're told in the church to stay out of politics, that the church is not the place for spewing political opinions and taking a stand regarding political controversy. And it might be a fine line sometimes. We get tired of the politics we see all around us and sometimes we just want the comfort and assurance that God is with us, without the flood of political dressing we get the rest of the week. But still, to those who tell the church to stay out of politics, they need to be reminded of this chapter in Micah. The whole book of Micah, really, is a policy critique. Micah is a prophet who is commissioned by God to scold his kinspeople, because of Israel's boon under the reigns of Kings Uzziah and Jotham. These kings might have secured prosperity for Israel as a nation, but it came at the expense of the poor, who were increasingly maltreated by the ruling elite.

Before this chapter God has rendered a verdict on those who defy Israel's holiness code and who disregard their obligation to practice justice. So in the book of Micah, there is an indictment and a verdict. One of the laws, "thou shalt not covet," was clearly broken by the powerful who wanted more property, particularly fertile fields, so they required taxes that couldn't possibly be met, and then took the fields when the taxes weren't paid. There were even prophets bankrolled by Jerusalem who cried out 'peace' when there wasn't peace and the ruling class refused to consider the plight of those they took advantage of. And this group of elites, including their paid prophets, also refused to repent when Micah confronted them.

In the 6th chapter, which is our reading today, we have a divine magistrate whose patience is exhausted because God is looking for an admission of guilt, even some small sign that the rulers are listening, and God gets nothing. So God puts together a kind of trial, with the mountains and the hills put on the stand as

witnesses, who testify to Israel's abominable practices. The big question is what has happened to Israel's morality? All God has required is that they worship with their whole hearts and practice justice, kindness, and humility. They have broken their covenant with God by allowing unchecked authority, which has resulted in authority that exploits. There is a quote from the Latino biblical scholar Juan Alfaro, who writes, "there is something worse than appearing before God empty-handed, and that is appearing before God dirty-handed and empty-hearted..." And that is Israel during Micah's ministry.

So regarding politics and religion, the book of Micah shouts politics from the mountains and the valleys. And if we are to consider God's directive through Micah, then we also have to consider how politics reaches into every aspect of our lives, and when justice, kindness and humility are absent, wherever they are absent, we must confront it. Micah calls on Israel to consider her lack of morality with God's directive of justice, kindness and humility. And there are others throughout the bible who offer correctives to Israel's bad behavior also. Jesus does it with the beatitudes, so let's look at those, our second reading this morning.

The beatitudes are part of a sermon Jesus preaches to the multitudes who followed him, some of them are his disciples, some come to hear him out of curiosity, and some come to test and hopefully trap him into saying or doing something against the religious structure or against the state, so that Rome could arrest him. There are 9 beatitudes and each one is a characteristic of God's call for kingdom living.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit – anyone who is left behind because of physical or psychological hardship – the kingdom of God is their just inheritance.
- Blessed are the mourners, for they will be comforted
- Blessed are the meek – the ones who resist nonviolently, who don't demand a quid pro quo – for they will inherit the earth
- Blessed are the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness – all those who commit their lives to spiritual discipline in order to exhibit high moral standards – for they will be filled
- Blessed are the ones who give mercy – the ones who are kind, who consider the consequences of their actions on others – for they will receive mercy
- Blessed are the pure in heart – leaders who walk side by side with their people; spiritual mentors who pray for others and ask others to pray for them – for they will see God
- Blessed are the peacemakers – the ones who break gridlocks when those in leadership positions refuse to talk together, or when they refuse to see each other as equally worthy, the peacemakers who are willing to put their lives on the line in order for others to be heard – for they shall be called children of God
- Blessed are the pursuers of righteous visions – the ones who dream big on behalf of those who have been silenced – for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
- Blessed are the ones who are reviled, persecuted, vilified, slandered for believing in and walking the vision of God, for they will be greatly rewarded in heaven.

Each of these beatitudes are the other side of what was going on in Israel at the time of Micah, and they're the other side of much of what's going on today in the offices of our country and other countries. These are our correctives for the politics of coercion and mistrust and dishonesty and corruption at the highest levels, which is what we live with politically in our country. We have divided ourselves into sides and we don't trust each other; we won't even talk to each

other if we can help it. So Micah's words are for us now as much as they were for Israel in the 8th century before Christ. We're still called to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. And when we don't heed Micah's words, or when we ignore the beatitudes as if we're either already following them or they don't apply to us, then we get a situation like this Dr. Seuss story, which if you are a Dr. Seuss fan you probably know well. It's the story about the Zax. And it goes like this:

One day, making tracks
 In the prairie of Prax,
 Came a North-Going Zax
 And a South-Going Zax.
 And it happened that both of them came to a place
 Where they bumped. There they stood.
 Foot to foot. Face to face.

"Look here, now!" the North-Going Zax said, "I say!
 You are blocking my path. You are right in my way.
 I'm a North-Going Zax and I always go north.
 Get out of my way, now, and let me go forth!"
 "Who's in whose way?" snapped the South-Going Zax.
 "I always go south, making south-going tracks.
 So you're in MY way! And I ask you to move
 And let me go south in my south-going groove."
 Then the North-Going Zax puffed his chest up with pride.
 "I never," he said, "take a step to one side.
 And I'll prove to you that I won't change my ways
 If I have to keep standing here fifty-nine days!"
 "And I'll prove to YOU," yelled the South-Going Zax,
 "That I can stand here in the prairie of Prax
 For fifty-nine years! For I live by a rule
 That I learned as a boy back in South-Going School.
 Never budge! That's my rule. Never budge in the least!
 Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east!"

I'll stay here, not budging! I can and I will
If it makes you and me and the whole world stand still!"
Well... Of course the world *didn't* stand still. The world grew.
In a couple of years a new highway came through
And they built it right over those two stubborn Zax
And left them there, standing un-budged in their tracks.

That story describes much of what we see around us these days. When we want what we want when we want it, that's the Zax, and that was Israel during Micah's time. That we want something and take ownership of that something in such a way that it becomes God's will for us. And then we end up with a prophet like Micah on our backs, or Jesus reminding us yet again that this isn't the way of the peacemakers, or the merciful, or those who see God. So what do we want to take home with us today? What do these scripture passages and this Zax story have to say to us, in our time?