

August 27, 2017
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Stay Woke”
Kevin J. Lowry



The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Micah 6:6–8

⁶“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?

1 Thessalonians 5:12–28

¹²But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil. ²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ²⁵Beloved, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

"Stay Woke"

Micah 6:6–8; *1 Thessalonians* 5:12–28

In 1953, a bushy-haired man arrived at the Chicago train station. He had come to Chicago to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. As he stepped off his train, the flashbulbs of cameras went off all around him and city officials moved forward to greet him. He thanked the people there to greet him but then excused himself for a moment. Everyone watched as he walked across the terminal toward an elderly black woman who was struggling with two large bags. He picked up her bags and helped her to her bus. Wishing her a good journey, he turned back to the crowd that had gathered giving his apologies.

Albert Schweitzer knew the truth. The old woman at the train station deserved respect and help because she was a child of God – she was made in God's image therefore was worthy of Schweitzer's love and aid because they both bore the image of their creator. By helping this woman, struggling at the bus stop, Schweitzer was living out his theology, a reverence for life where we all are in an interdependent relationship to all living things and owe to all of them the same care and respect that we wish for ourselves. In his autobiography, Schweitzer explained how the development of this worldview was an awakening from some kind of mental daze. He was now awake to the complexities of the human condition and saw the necessity to work on something constructive for the good and wellbeing of humanity.

The first lesson this morning, Micah chapter six, verses six to eight, might just be the original and most viral tweet that the world has ever seen. In less than 140 characters the prophet Micah boils down all that the God requires of God's people: To do **justice**, and to **love kindness**, and to walk **humbly with our God**. As we have witnessed in our current culture, these small quips can have broad impact on shaping a narrative in a community.

Micah is talking to a people, in a time that has lost their way. They were a society that was in the midst of chaos and confusion. A time and place where false prophets were making claims false against God and allowing their own political agendas to supersede God's divine plan, a community where all members are in right-relationship with one another, with creation, and with God. So, God sends in Micah, with a road map to shake things up and create a new way forward that is founded in love, justice, mercy, and humility.

Justice is doing the right thing, no matter how difficult or inconvenient that may be. Mercy is doing the loving and gracious thing despite the sacrifice it requires of one's self.

Justice and mercy are important to living in into God's plan for the human project, but Humility is at the heart of Micah's road map. Humility is the liberation and freedom from pride or arrogance. It is modest view of an individual's own importance in the midst of community.

Justice, Mercy, and Humility are interwoven into God's divine plan. We cannot separate one from the other, because without mercy and justice you cannot have humility and without humility you cannot mercy and justice.

In his 1966 speech "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution,"¹ The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. told Washington Irving's story Rip Van Winkle. King pointed out that one thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed. He was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that **he slept through a revolution**. King used this story to challenge the Church in the time of the social revolution of the 1960's. A time and place where an older order was passing away and a new way was coming into being. A new way of being where the Church has a great responsibility. A time where the church is called to it's true nature: to lead forth, shed worn-out beliefs and old ways of thinking. King said, "It has always been the role of the Church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break traditions if necessary." King is challenging the Church to remain awake during the revolution and witness to the world that – as the image of God – we are all responsible for

¹ <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware>

extending God's love to every living being, to extend justice in each of our communities, and to act with mercy in our human relationships with one another. King is calling the church out of the daze of complicity and inviting them into active participation in building God's Kingdom – the Beloved Community.

For King, our religious communities are the custodian of God's map in our society, the way of being that will fulfill God's divine plan and restore the kingdom, right here, right now. Likewise, in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he is urging them to be wake up to a new way of being in the world – to the revolutionary community in which they are apart. These early Christian communities were breaking down the social systems and traditions of their day and redefining what it meant to be a religious community and to be in the world.

In his letter, Paul was making appeal about the way it is to live in the world. This petition is the foundation of all previous guidance, an request that lies at the heart of every Christian life. Christianity is practiced in Community – For Christians the way forward, is in life together, in Communion and unity. Now let's be honest, what Paul is proposing here stands in opposition to everything that the early Christ-followers experience in their relationship to the world and to God. In our reading of Paul's letters we sometimes forget the radical nature of what Paul is saying in his first century context– do good to all, help the weak, do not repay evil for evil. In Paul's time the standard governing for human relationships was about pay back, about maintaining and guarding one's own respect. It was about preserving the status quo and holding on to power. It was about division and segregation.

One might have to ask if it has really changed in two thousand years? Today we continue to struggle with the ideas of individualism and materialism where everyone is out for him or herself, or their self. We pardon the systems of power that dehumanize and other. We segregate and divide based on the color of our skin, religion, national origin, sexuality and gender identity, or the multitude of other ways we experience our own collective humanity. Much like the Thessalonians, there are times where we can be in a daze. We can be people who are asleep during a revolution happening right in front of us.

There is a term within activist communities: **being woke**. The term woke, drives from being awake. It is slang to describe informed, questioning, self-educating individual. It describes someone who is awake and knowing of what's going on in the community. It is a person who is thinking in a way that questions the structures of power and control that exist in our society. It describes someone who is aware the ways in which racism, sexism, classism, and ableism affect how we live our lives and our relationships with one another on a daily basis.

David Brooks in the *New York Times* wrote that, "To be woke is to be radically aware and justifiably paranoid. It is to be cognizant of the rot pervading the power structures. The woke manner shares cool's rebel posture, but it is the opposite of cool in certain respects." For Brook's being "cool was politically detached, but being a social activist is required for being woke. Cool was individualistic, but woke is collectivist. Cool was emotionally reserved; woke is angry, passionate and indignant. Cool was morally ambiguous; woke seeks to establish a clear marker for what is unacceptable."

Jesus was woke. Flipping over the money changers tables in the temple was angry passionate and indignant. Eating with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and whoever else that showed up was a collectivist ideology. Jesus took a rebel posture in the way he lived his life; encountered death on the cross and was defied death three days later in his resurrection. Paul's appeal to the Thessalonians takes this same rebel posture, of Jesus, and goes against the grain of this self-centered world. Paul is calling the Thessalonians into a way of life, in community, that wakes the early Christ-followers out of a slumber and breaks open the restrictions and restraints of human interactions focused on the self.

Paul is laying out what it means to be a woke Christian: living fully aware of the community: living in peace with each other; warning the idlers; cheering up the fainthearted, supporting the weak, and being patient with everyone. Making sure that no one repays one evil with another. Always seeking what is good for each other – and for all people. Yet, Paul does not only focus on our person to person relationships but the relationship between the people and God: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Still today, what Paul lays out for the Thessalonians living in a religious community are counter-cultural to the norms and traditions of our western society.

Earlier this summer in her Time for Young Disciples, Amy challenged the children and congregation to pray constantly as we go about our daily lives with our eyes open. This challenge asked us to live a life of active, constant, prayer in the ordinary encounters and circumstances of our lives. If we are praying with our eyes open then both the simplest and the most profound aspects of our lives transform into holy moments. Whatever we doing becomes part of our active participation in God's work to restore creation in this time and place. Whatever work we do – it becomes the very work of God and brings wholeness to the world. What this requires of us is to be Christ-like within our places of work, on campus, and in our communities seeking what is good for each other – for all people as we actively engage in justice, love, compassion in the midst of our everyday life.

Let's be real. Paul and Micah were woke; Jesus was woke; and in this time, we are called to be woke and stay woke because we too are in a revolution, one that we cannot sleep through. We can no longer sit idly by in our houses of worship, but we have to step into the streets, and on to our campuses with a new way forward – a new road map -- for what for our religious and spiritual communities can be as we redefine what it means to be a follower of Christ.

We called to a Christ-like-life through an active engagement in the social issues of our community, calling out hate, and bigotry, and racism for what they are – sins. Actions that separate us from one another and from God. Paul is calling us to invite each other into a life-giving and welcoming communities. We are called to extend mercy and compassion to all those we encounter through life, regardless of who they are, what they believe or where they come from. We called to serve others with radically hospitality and generosity that welcomes the stranger. And, we are called to walk humbly with God in prayer and thanksgiving in every circumstance we encounter along our journey.

Amen