

15th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

*Micah 6:1-8**Hear what the Lord says:**Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.**Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel.**'O my people, what have I done to you?**In what have I wearied you? Answer me!**For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.**O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.'**'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?**Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?**Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'**He 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?*

Think about your favorite courtroom drama. For some of us, our favorite courtroom drama may be the intensity of "A Few Good Men," when Jack Nicholson tells Tom Cruise that "you can't *handle* the truth!" Or perhaps it's the heartbreaking struggle of Tom Hank's character in the movie, "Philadelphia," as Denzel Washington's character defends him from a wrongful firing due to him having AIDS. Or maybe it's "To Kill A Mockingbird" when Atticus Finch tries to defend Tom Robinson, a young black man falsely accused of raping a white woman.

The book of Micah is, in fact, a courtroom drama such as these. Long before Harper Lee wrote “To Kill a Mockingbird,” long before Tom Cruise starred in “A Few Good Men,” or Tom Hanks in “Philadelphia,” there was another courtroom drama involving the Israelites and their god, YHWH.

However, unlike the defendants in the before-mentioned courtroom movies, the Israelites referred to in the book of Micah did not have right on their side. In order to understand the situation, it's important for us to learn a bit about the historical context of the book of Micah.

At the time this book was written, the Israelites were split into two kingdoms. The northern half was called Israel and the southern half was called Judah. In 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom. Therefore, many Israelites from the northern kingdom became refugees that fled to the southern kingdom to find sanctuary. The southern kingdom, Judah, managed to, for some time at least, hold the Assyrians at bay by paying massive tributes to their kings to appease them. However, this model was a desperate attempt at survival. It wasn't sustainable. Someone had to pay for the tributes.

The wealthy people, the people in control, the government officials, the priests, the land owners, got rich off of the refugees and peasant farmers of Judah in order to pay for the tributes to the Assyrians. Essentially, the richer were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer.

Many of the Israelites had tossed aside social justice in favor of a “survival of the fittest” mentality. Judah was living under constant fear of invasion and that fear caused powerful people to cling to their power in more than they did under the best of circumstances. The peasants, the farmers, the refugees, the homeless and impoverished, all of them were simply forced to pick themselves up by their bootstraps.

We don't know much about the prophet Micah. But we do know that he was called by YHWH to prophesy against such injustice.

Therefore, the Israelites are called into the courtroom.

YHWH calls the Israelites into the courtroom because a contract has been breached. The Israelites' call to care for one another and provide for the refugee and to live as a righteous people has been cast aside. The covenant has been broken and there must be an accounting for it.

And so God tells the Israelites that they have forsaken the covenant. The Israelites shift uneasily in the defendant seat.

God begins God's opening remarks in the beginning of chapter 6 of Micah's book.

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,

and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,

and you enduring foundations of the earth;

for the Lord has a controversy with his people,

and he will contend with Israel.

Pacing in front of the courtroom, God continues by reminding the Israelites of all that God has done for them.

'O my people, what have I done to you?

*In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.*

*O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.'*

After making his opening plea, the rest of God's claims are found in the rest of the book of Micah. There has been much wickedness. Much deceitful speaking. Fields have been coveted. Houses have been seized. Householders have been oppressed. Women and children have been driven out of their homes.

The Israelites look shamefully at the ground. They know they've screwed up. They know they've broken the covenant. They know that something must be done to reckon for their sins.

The Israelites stand up in front of the courtroom and take out their checkbooks. "Ok, how much do we owe you?"

*'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?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'*

First they want to give God their burnt offerings. With a beautiful year-old calf. But God shakes God's head.

Then they want to give God a thousand rams. But God shakes God's head.

Then they want to give God tens of thousands of rivers of oil. But God shakes God's head.

Finally, they offer to give God their firstborn child for their transgression. Surely, they think, *this* will appease YHWH. But, still, God shakes God's head and says no.

The Israelites stand in wonder, thinking that surely nothing they can give will be good enough for God.

But what God has in mind is not a commodity. Not something that can be purchased with gold or silver. This is not something that they value right now, even though it is more precious than any amount of money or goods. What God requires is something that cannot be done with a quick scrawl on a blank check. It will not be that easy.

The Israelites look at God. In fact, everyone in the courtroom looks to God and awaits for an answer.

God turns to the Israelites and says, “this I will require of you.”

*but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Three verbs. Do, love, and walk.

We are called to do justice. Not just “believe” in justice. Not just “preach” justice. We are called to *do* justice. That means when we see injustice happening, we don’t just talk about it. We don’t just sing about it. We don’t just listen to a sermon about it to make ourselves feel better and sleep comfortably at night. We are called to *do* justice. This requires action. This requires sacrifice. This requires *time!*

We are called to love kindness. We are called to have a love affair with kindness and caring. We are called to not just to be kind because we are *supposed to*. We are called to be kind because we *love* ourselves and each other enough to *love* doing it.

Lastly, we are called to walk humbly with God. This means a journey. This means that we are to remember our place. We are to not get so “high and mighty” that we forget who is *leading* us as we walk. We are to walk, not run. We are to walk, not crawl. We are meant to find a rhythm with walking with God. God is to set the pace and the direction; not us.

The Israelites had forgotten this. Instead of doing justice, they had ignored it. Instead of loving kindness, they loved greed and malice. Instead of walking humbly with God, they arrogantly walked off in a different direction.

We are just as guilty as the Israelites. Their story is our story. Their struggles our struggles. We are them and they are us. Together, we stand accused of injustice in this judicial dispute.

But there is good news to be had even amid the somber prophesies of Micah.

And that good news is this: God, in addition to serving as our prosecuting attorney, is also judge, jury, and (best of all) our defense attorney as well!

God is not out for revenge against us. God has called us into this courtroom that we have a change of heart. God has called us into this courtroom so that we might understand the gravity of our sins and the magnitude of God’s mercy. God has called us into this courtroom that we might do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

God has our backs. That is the good news. But even better news is that God, first and foremost, has the backs of those who have been mistreated and abused. Instead of being in a courtroom, God would much rather us be outside of it, standing alongside those who need more justice, more kindness, and more humble dealings.

Together, may you and I heed Micah’s call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.