

Living Before the Face of God: The Social Dimension

From the series: Meeting God Again For the First Time

Text: Micah 6:8; Matthew 6:10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I pulled a book from my shelves this week. It had been there for a long time. I always knew it was there, but I had never read it. I purchased it in the early 70's. It was published in 1970. To show you how ancient it is, it cost me \$1.25. I pulled it down now because of its title, its title which I thought might have something of interest to say to the theme of this morning's message, which is, "Living Before the Face of God: The Social Dimension." The title of that book is *The Politics of God*, and I smiled to myself as I realized that, from the time I came into the ministry until the present, I've done a 180° turn. When I came into the ministry, I was strictly warned not to bring politics into the pulpit. In fact, we all know that in polite conversation one is not to speak of religion or politics. In preaching it's a little difficult not to speak about religion, although some do it successfully. But, politics – derived from the Greek word, *polis*, which means city – I've come to see, has everything to do with the biblical tradition on which we stand. The faith of Israel, which came to expression in Jesus, is from beginning to end very political in terms of its concerns for the *polis*, the city, or, extended, for the human community. The wellbeing of the human community is of extreme concern to the God of Israel, to the God Who comes to expression in Jesus Christ. One cannot be faithful to the biblical tradition without taking seriously the social dimension. It is there from beginning to end.

While we ought never to neglect the personal dimension, as we said last week, it is the social dimension that is by far the major theme of the biblical tradition, and it is interesting to me that I could have missed that in all of my years of training and the early years of my ministry. But there are two ways to avoid that social dimension. I pursued the first way in the early years of my ministry. That is the way that is represented in the question – listen to the question, see if you recognize the question – "Where will you spend eternity?"

Now, for one thing, that's a question addressed to an individual and, secondly, it's a question that takes the focus off the present and this world and focuses it on the world to come. I was very good at that. Most of you are happy you never knew me. I would have been trying to get you saved. Not so much to make your life

good here now, but to get you secured for eternal life in heaven. That was my focus. I didn't understand anything else. I thought that's what it was all about.

In the more recent decades, the social dimension of the biblical tradition has been avoided by an equally individualistic approach, but this time, the approach of self-fulfillment or peace of mind. It's a focus on me and my comfortable adjustment in life. There was a very acute sociological analysis of American society published in 1985 called *Habits of the Heart* and, in that analysis of American society, American society was characterized by the phrase, "The therapeutic society." Not therapy in the sense of the clinical technique that deals with emotional or psychic disorder, but therapy in the sense of enabling us to be adjusted in our environment, in our situations. Now, there's nothing really wrong with that, except to reduce the function of religion to be an agent for my personal adjustment is hardly worthy of the religious traditions that have marked the human family down through the centuries.

But, in either case – whether the focus is on the individual to bring that person to personal salvation for eternal security in heaven, or whether it is on the individual to create peace of mind and self-realization here and now - what is missed is that social dimension which is in the scriptures from the beginning. Israel was born in a liberation movement. The founding event of Israel was the Exodus, and in those opening chapters of Exodus, you remember that the God of Israel was one who was understood to hear the cries of the people. It is stated in those opening chapters: the cries of my people have come to me, and God calls Moses to lead those slaves out of Egyptian bondage.

Walter Brueggemann speaks about the royal consciousness of Egypt that had a totalitarian grip on the people who were held in oppressive economic exploitation. And that regime was legitimated by the royal priesthood. Israel moved out of that situation of slavery and into its own land and, for a couple of hundred years, lived under what we could describe as a theocracy. God was king. No more of that human monarch on the throne that led to oppression. But memory is short, and before long there was that debate within Israel. There were those voices saying we want to be like other nations. We need a king. And Samuel warned Israel about the implications of establishing a monarchy. But, nonetheless, it was established. And it went not so poorly with Saul and quite well with David, but you remember Solomon whose oppressive public works projects threw the people into servitude again, with economic exploitation and political oppression. It was a domination system all over again.

But there was one thing that saved Israel from being just like all the other nations, because, with the rise of monarchy, came the voice of prophecy. If I were to name what gift Israel has given to the world, it would be that prophetic voice, that prophetic voice endowed with the spirit of God that had the courage to speak truth to power. That is the prophetic function and, in Israel's history, that which

shaped it, made it unique was that prophetic voice that was always addressed to those who abused the people.

I could have chosen most any prophet. I could have chosen passage after passage to illustrate what I am trying to say this morning, but I felt that Micah's language was so descriptive as he addresses the leaders of Israel, addressing those who are responsible for the political and religious leadership of the nation.

"You hate good and love evil. You tear the skin off my people and the flesh off their bones. You eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron."

He goes on to excoriate the prophets who play for pay, who have a word of peace for those who can pay, but no word at all for those who don't put something in their mouth. He criticizes the priesthood which carries on an empty ritual, legitimizing a regime that is full of injustice, lacking all compassion. And then in his conclusion, he says,

"Because of this terrible oppression of the vast majority of the people, Zion will be like a plowed field and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins."

Well, there are those who say, "Well, what should we do? Would the Lord like 1,000 calves, 10,000 rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn, the fruit of my body? Would this please the Lord?" To which the prophet says,

"Look, you know what the Lord requires - to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. It isn't that difficult."

This was the prophetic description for a society marked by justice and compassion. That prophetic voice came to expression again in Jesus. Over against that politics of exclusion through temple rites and holiness and being the right kind of people, Jesus countered with a politics of compassion. We sang together the Lord's Prayer in which Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray and in which we have the words, "Thy kingdom come." In other words, your rule prevail. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The focus is here and now. Thy will be done, here and now, as it is in heaven. The Sermon on the Mount, in which the Lord's Prayer appears, also has the Golden Rule, which wasn't original with Jesus and has come to expression in several different forms. But, as a matter of fact, it still is very much at the heart of the social concern, albeit in that more personal relationship: Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. And the very statement is in marked contrast to the rather flippant attitude of so much of contemporary society symbolized in a bumper sticker I saw recently which said, in Old English print, "Do Unto Others and Split." Jesus, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, called for a politics of compassion and embodied in his ministry, in his table fellowship, in his openness to all, that access to the grace of God and that embrace by God of all people. And it was in his challenge to that

established authority, reflecting very much the established authority of Micah's day although without a reigning monarch, that Jesus was crucified.

Someone has said that there were three times when the justice and compassion which God wills for society had been rejected - one time in the Hebrew monarchy, a second time in the ministry of Jesus, and then a third time when the emperor Constantine established the Christian faith. That establishment of the Christian faith by Constantine has often been characterized as the conquering of the empire by the Gospel, but has turned out in all truth to be the co-opting of the Gospel by the empire, because from 313 on, with the legitimization of the Christian faith, throne and altar once again came together. The throne created space for the altar and the altar legitimated the throne. Just as the kings of Israel had their retinue of prophets and priests who were paid to speak the party line and to speak no other line, just so the temptation of the church has been to baptize the regime rather than to stand over against it, in the name of the God of Israel, in the name of Jesus, and to say human community is to be structured other than the way it is.

Well, what are we to do about it? It is such a massive problem. Are you aware that our world, our society, our global society and even particularly our American society are in a state of crisis, and that the crisis is not really a crisis of abortion or sexual orientation or crime on the streets? The crisis is rather the structures and the systems by which our societies are shaped and formed, the way in which they function. We are coming to see rather lately that the problem with the failure of human community is a systemic problem. It is not that there are not a lot of people of good will. It is not that there are not a lot of people who are trying to do good things. It is that the very way in which our systems, political and economic, are structured continue to exacerbate the problem rather than move us toward world community. In our own country, just to cite one facet of the crisis, there is a growing gulf between the rich and the poor. Let me give you some statistics, just to help you take that in. During the 1980s, 90% of the total increase in income went to the wealthiest 20% of the population. The remaining 10% of the increase was spread over 90% of the people. Obviously, that has to lead to the growing gulf between the rich and the poor. In 1963, the ratio of CEO salaries to average worker salaries in the same company was 41 to 1. Now, being the local CEO, I think that's fair. 41 to 1. That was 1963. You know what it is now? 225 to 1. You know what it is in Germany right now? 20 to 1.

In 1963, the wealthiest one percent of families owned 23% of the wealth in terms of homes and cars and stocks and savings. The wealthiest one percent owned 23%. In 1994, the wealthiest one percent owned 44%. In the U.S., the ratio of annual income received by the top 10% of the population compared to the bottom 10% is 6 to 1. For comparison purposes, in Finland it's just over 2 to 1, in France, 2 1/2 to 1, in Germany and the United Kingdom, 3 to 1. These statistics simply point to an inevitable growth in the gap between those who possess and those who lack. It is a trend. That's the direction in which it's moving. But those

particular statistics are only signs of something that can be seen in the social structures. Education, for example, is lacking severely in poor areas of urban blight, but is doing well in fortunate areas like ours. And yet, even here one doesn't have to scratch too hard to find a begrudging of that which is the future of society.

In those areas where wealth abounds, there are growing gated communities. Now, I like gated communities. I like to feel safe and secure behind those walls, to know that there is a guardhouse and a guard. And one can understand the growth in gated communities among the wealthy because there is so much crime and violence in society, and crime seems everywhere and out of control, and the need to build more prisons and to gain more prison beds is in the news all the time.

Might we ask, might we ask why? Are American people simply more prone to crime? Or is there something in the social situation of our own country and our own time that is exacerbating that move to crime and violence? Are we so inured with the American dream? Are we so shaped by a consumerism culture that, failing to realize it, we turn violent? And is it possible that there can be human community where there is more crime on the street and more gated communities? We will not be able to survive that way. There is no human community that way. If you take God out of the equation, if you take human decency out of the equation, it is simply this, that any world that has people who have nothing to lose is a dangerous world. It cannot be a world of human community. It is simply a practical matter, of wisdom, even apart from God, even apart from the God of Israel, even apart from the way of Jesus, even apart from just plain human decency as we have been shaped by the biblical tradition.

It is not an easy matter to address. I am not an economist. I am not a sociologist, and you must be tired of blustering rhetoric from the pulpit that would lay a layer of guilt in order to execute better performance. That's not what this is about. It is extremely complex. It is a global problem. But, do you sense that it is a very real crisis in our world, and would anyone refute the fact that it is a central biblical concern and therefore that about which we must be concerned? Is it not true, as the followers of Jesus in the tradition of the God of Israel, that domination systems, economic exploitation and political oppression, poverty, hunger, people living below a subsistence level where there is nothing but hopelessness and despair - is that not something about which our souls should be wrenched?

I was criticized after the first sermon because all I tried to do was raise the consciousness, whereas it was claimed I should have a passionate appeal to *do something*. Well, I'm not sure that it's my responsibility to solve the problem. Why is it any more my responsibility to put the new system together than yours? Aren't we in this together? There are those of you with greater expertise than me. And together, in community, if we are concerned about it, then ought we not to be putting our creative heads together and our creative caring, passionate souls together to say, "How in the world can we make this a more humane world?"

What would happen if we took our PAC money, Political Action Committee money, and pooled it and stormed Lansing and Washington and buttonholed our legislators and even greased their campaign fund a little and said to them, "What are you doing for the least of these, my brothers and sisters?" Rather than make sure you vote correctly on that amendment that will create a tax loophole so I can give more to Christ Community? You see, you don't need a guilt-inflicting sermon from a preacher without expertise as to how to solve the thing.

Hear me. Hear me. There is a social dimension to our faith and together we must address those structural, systemic problems that make for multitudes of humankind a human existence less than fully human. God cares, and we must care, too.