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We Know Who You're Talking About
Micah 6 | Matthew 8: 14-22

If you were to survey reasonably informed churchgoers and ask what is your favorite scripture, Micah 6:8 would surely receive a fair share of the votes. It is a memorable line and a compelling summation of God's law, as clear in giving direction as spacious in extending grace. "And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" This famous question is set at the conclusion of a ruminative paragraph on the meaning of worship. "With what shall I come before the Lord" and how should I "bow myself before God on high?" Would the sacrifice of burnt offerings or young calves be pleasing to God? Does God desire a thousand head of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Maybe a portion of my wealth is insufficient, Micah wonders. Why stop at money, he says, when I could give my firstborn child, "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul." Only after considering these measures is Micah's prayer answered. I could make any of these offerings, he concludes, but even the costliest of them would be unworthy if they were not matched with a pure and honest heart. We worship God not with what we give but by how we are. God is looking not for material offerings but for qualities of character - humility, generosity, kindness. These are the things that God requires of us.

Among the prophets, Micah seems especially concerned with these marks of personal integrity. In fact it may be that we remember chapter 6 verse 8 in part because it is among the safer and more pleasant passages in a book preoccupied with scorching commentary on the social order. "Listen, you heads of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel," Isaiah addresses the ruling class, "you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people...and chop them up like flesh in a cauldron." The ancient Hebrews didn't canonize any of the biblical prophets for mincing words, and Micah's confrontational speech burns as hot as any of the minor fire breathers. His main line of argument is that all the whole professional class of posturing politicians, purse snatching priests, and money hustling scribes are corrupted by the privileges of their position. Their smooth talk promises nothing but "empty falsehoods," Micah says. But don't dismiss him merely as a populist radical of emotional screed. He's specific and he's got the receipts. He's here to talk about judges who are taking bribes before the court, teachers and educators exploiting their students with fees, priests and prophets selling oracles like any other commodity. Micah condemns the bankers foreclosing on homes, princes seizing public land, and merchants pricing goods with weighted scales. Among the critiques of the social order that we can read in the Old Testament prophets, Micah's words are notably specific and personal. Aside from the kings during whose reign Micah was active - Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah - the prophet doesn't call out people by name but you have to imagine that people generally understood who he was referring to.

Look at it this way. If I were to begin to proclaim, a prophet in the age of Obama and Trump and Biden, judgment of similar classes today would you not know who I was referring to and could you not even think of a few names? Greedy are the financiers who bundle up mortgages and sell them as goods at market and not as stewards of families and homes! Wicked are the officers who feed our prisons with the flesh of Black men. Woe be to the judges who sanctify the lives of children by impoverishing women and executing men. Haughty are the Senators who enrich themselves in power; craven are the speakers who negotiate with terrorists; vulgar are the candidates with fake identities. If I were to preach like Micah preached, would I be making myself clear enough?

Micah was deeply disappointed in the integrity of Israel's leaders. We may share his sentiments about our own time and circumstances. How is that we have come to be governed by such untruthful individuals and interests? Politicians have always hidden a part of themselves behind a curated image, often disgraced themselves with scandals unsuccessfully concealed, frequently misdirected and misrepresented and lied to win or to keep power. But the fabrications of Trump and now Santos have brought us to farcical proportions of political storytelling. So Micah's critique is not just about the problematic individuals. He's saying something about the social fabric of Israel that empowers and rewards the dishonesty of particular characters. He doesn't need to name the George Santos of his time because everyone already knows who that is. The problem isn't with this priest or that politician. The fury of the biblical prophets rarely scapegoats individuals because that would let the rest of us off the hook.

Their critique is not just personal and individual, though God does require of us these virtuous qualities we discussed. The prophets are concerned with the whole social order, the political and the economic. Not only personal righteousness. Also collective justice. In fact the prophetic tradition carries these ideas together - as Dr. King famously proclaimed - "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." He didn't make that up. It's a verbatim quote from the prophet Amos.

So there is another way that we might answer Micah's famous question. What does the Lord require of us? Righteousness and justice.

Righteousness - that is to say, the virtues of humility, faithfulness, and love. Of course it takes no special power of perception to see that this order of righteousness is deficient in so much of our common life. This is also the place in God's vision where each of us has the most power and responsibility. I can't control the moral choices of the president, but we can each cultivate in ourselves humane disciplines of honest and loving life.

Justice - that is to say, a social order that glorifies God in truth and liberty and equity. And here is where we are all implicated. For if there is a lack of justice in the social order, there must be a lack of virtue in all of us. Our ruling class - those whom Micah describes as butchers, those whom Isaiah characterizes as jackals, tyrannical princes, the mercenary priests, the corrupted scribes - those we can talk about without naming because we can all see what they are doing, have arisen from the midst of us. So let us not be self-righteous in doing what God requires.

This work will not be finished until all of God's creation worships with integrity. That means that our inner lives and outer lives are true, that we glorify God with all that we are and all that we do, and that all of us, personally and collectively, individually and corporately bear witness to the justice and righteousness of God through and through.

What a relief to know that I don't have to give any costly livestock, no rivers oil, not my first born child. To do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Micah makes the worship of God sound somewhat inexpensive.

What does the Lord require of you?

Only justice and righteousness.

Honestly, it could be more than I care to give.