

The Great Prophetic Summary and Summons

Micah 6:6-8

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February 2, 2020

You love these words from Micah. We sing them every month as we close our Communion service. They are, in my mind, the great prophetic summary and great prophetic summons. They distill the heart of Hebrew religion and the heart of Jesus' growing up faith. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God."

I

Don't we long for summaries, short sayings that capture the essence of big things? Something to carry in our pockets, or in our minds?

Jesus gave us his great summary when asked, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law, or Torah, or Hebrew scriptures. He answered quoting two different passages from the Old Testament and bringing them together as one: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). And then he added the second indispensable part: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)

There it is, the Bible in two sentences.

There is a story about the great rabbi of the first century before Christ, Rabbi Hillel. A young man came to him and said, “I will convert to your religion if you will recite the whole Torah while standing on one foot.” Rabbi Hillel stood on one foot and said,

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah.

All else is commentary. Go and learn.

The Hebrew scriptures in one sentence, a version of Jesus’ Golden Rule.

Such is what Micah does in today’s text. It is the great prophetic summary in three phrases.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

One can see in these three phrases the heart of the Hebrew prophets’ message. It combines the justice of Amos, the mercy of Hosea and the humble walk of Isaiah

II

Let’s look at each, beginning with Amos, the fiery prophet raised by the shepherds of Tekoa. It was the 8th century B.C.E. He was a migrant worker who moved around Israel in a geographical circle, tending the peasants’ sheep in one

place, then pinching back sycamore trees in another place, and tending oxen in another. He saw what was going on in his nation, particularly for the underclass.

One day while minding his sheep, Amos says, “God kidnapped me from behind my flock.” Like some “lamb seized by a mountain lion”, he said, “I was seized by the word of God...the Lord has spoken; I must prophesy!”

His first, maybe last, sermon was an unforgettable one. It was the most high and holy day for the nation of Israel, the yearly celebration at Bethel. Everyone gathered to celebrate the nation and the nation’s God. They sang “God bless O Israel, land that I love.” They had reason to be happy. They were at the pinnacle of their military strength. The economy was going great, at least for the ones at the top. Wall Street was happy and King Jeroboam II was riding high in the polls.

It was like Inauguration Day in America. The politicians were all there and the judges, the poets and the preachers. There was the pageantry of songs, poems and prayers. Everyone dressed to the nines. Celebration was in the air.

In walked Amos from Tekoa. Think of Caesar Chavez or Martin Luther King Jr. or Reverend Barber crashing the party. What Amos said still reverberates today. He warmed up the crowd by saying the world was going to hell in a handbasket (Amen!) and pronounced God’s judgement on the enemy nations

around Israel's borders (Double Amen!) But then he turned to the sins of Israel and the crowd grew quiet.

You have sold for silver those whose cause is just
and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Your courts of law are a sham,
giving preferential treatment to the rich.

Your merchants make a killing on the backs of the poor.

He said, "You've been crooked so long you don't know what straight is anymore. God is going to drop a plumb line from heaven so that you can see again what is straight and what is crooked."

People were getting nervous. Then he turned to the religious leaders and the religious folk. "You dress up and come to worship, but you ignore the needs of your neighbor". Then he delivered these words from the Lord:

I hate, I despise your worship services, your prayers and songs, your religious extravaganzas and your pot-luck dinners. (Loosely translated from the Hebrew!)

I will not accept your burnt offerings and sacrifices, God said,

But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Here is the image. Justice is like the rivers and streams that flow through the land bringing forth life and health. But when these rivers and streams are obstructed by greed and prejudice and ignorance the land withers and begins to die. As Walter Rauschenbusch the father of the Social Gospel Movement in America, himself a Baptist said, “Nations die of legalized injustice.” This is true economically, ecologically, politically and relationally.

The king’s priest came to Amos and said, “The land cannot bear your words! Go, do your prophesying elsewhere.” But his words were the life-giving stream.

How to do justice? It is at the same time complex and simple. Telling the truth, fairness in the courts, honesty in business, laws and policies that serve all the people not just some.

The philosopher John Rawls in his book on *Justice* gives us a thought experiment about how to think about justice. *What nation in what century would you choose to live in if you could not choose where in that society you would be born?* The lesson: The more just as a society the less difference it would make where in that society you were born. How would our city, county, nation measure up?

So, Amos the prophet of justice. What does the Lord require of you but to *do justice*. Now we move to mercy. (You may be needing some right now!) Justice without mercy is always something less than justice.

III

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and *love mercy*. Hosea was the prophet of mercy.

Hosea also called out Israel for its sins, including the sin of injustice. But he became the prophet of mercy, and it was bound up in his own troubled personal life, his marriage.

Chapters one and three of Hosea give up the gist of the story. It appears that he married a woman with a checkered past. Her name was Gomer. And that God directed him to do so! Then in the middle of their marriage years Gomer left him and ended up in prostitution as a sex slave. With his shattered heart, Hosea took her back and, moreover, paid the money necessary to buy her freedom.

His marriage then became a powerful parable of God's relationship to Israel. God's instruction to marry Gomer, a woman of questionable character was a parable of how God entered into covenant with Israel and us, a flawed and fallible people. And Hosea's taking his wife back after she abandoned him and fell into prostitution was parable of how ready a heart-broken God is to take us back

when we have broken all our promises and vows. Hosea said that if indeed Israel persisted in disobedience and was destroyed by Assyria, God would still take them back and restore them.

Why? Because the heart of God's character is *hesed*, steadfast love, mercy abounding. A love that will not let us go.

In the New Testament, I John says, "God is Love." The Hebrew scriptures say over and over, "God is *hesed*." The most oft repeated description of God in the Hebrew scriptures is Exodus 34:7: "The Lord, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*)." It is what I call the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. When Christians say the God of the Old Testament is a God of Wrath and the God of the New Testament is a God of Love, it is a slander of the Hebrew religion. The heart of who God is is *hesed*.

So in chapter 11 God speaks to Israel as a parent watching her child stray and get into trouble: "I loved you as my child, God said, fed you, taught you to walk, led you drew you, close with cords of love.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?....

My heart recoils within me,

my compassion grows warm and tender

I will not act on my anger
 for I am God, not a mortal
 The Holy One in your midst.

God's *hesed*, steadfast love is like that, like a husband or wife taking back an unfaithful spouse, like a parent who cannot give up on her child.

O Love that will not let me go
 I rest my weary soul in thee
 I give thee back the life I owe
 that in thine ocean depths its flow
 shall richer, fuller be.

(Anyone remember that old hymn?)

At the beginning of his ministry Hosea was like a prophet going through the streets wearing a sandwich board. The front side read: "Repent or Perish". The back side read: "It's Not Too Late". At the end of his ministry he wore a sandwich board that read on the front (as Buechner put it): "God is Love"; and on the back it read: "There's No End To It"¹.

Perhaps the most quoted line of Hosea's was this: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Mercy, *hesed*, steadfast love. Jesus himself quoted the words when he was attacked by religious leaders for eating meals with tax-collectors and sinners.

Jesus replied, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” In other words, “Get your Bibles and look up Hosea 6:6”

There is justice to do, justice flowing from God like a mighty river, but there is mercy too, mercy always. Shakespeare wrote:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as gentle rain from heaven.²

Justice like a mighty river; mercy like the gentle rains.

IV

But that’s not all. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and *walk humbly* with your God.”

Isaiah is the prophet who teaches us to walk humbly.

He was in the Temple in Jerusalem when God in all God’s terrible glory appeared to him. Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up.” Smoke filled the Temple, angel-like creatures called *seraphim* flew around the throne singing. “Holy, Holy, Holy”. And the ground itself seemed to shake.

What was Isaiah’s response? “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” He had experienced the

holiness of God, the absolute difference and distance between God and us and became acutely aware of his sins and his nation's sins.

In the vision, the seraphim took a hot coal from the altar and placed it on his lips and said, "Your lips are cleansed now, and your sin forgiven."

Then God spoke and said, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And Isaiah heard and said: "Here am I, send me."

To walk humbly is to know our need of God. It is to know the limitations of our knowledge, and goodness and power. Our justice can never be perfect; our love can never be perfect; so humbly we walk with God.

V

The great prophetic summary is also the great prophetic summons. God says, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" And we say, still shaking a little: "Here am I, send me!"

Not sacrifices done to make God love us, or to appease God's anger. God already and forever loves us. Sacrifice-religion is buried deep into our bones. It says, "I must do this or God will not love me." This is a lethal religion. It breeds a secret anger toward God, for we can never do enough, be perfect enough. True religion, then and now, is not bound up in religious sacrifice and religious

observance. It is this: To do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.

Hosea cried out: “With what shall I come before the Lord?” Burnt offerings, gifts of rams, rivers of oil? One of our children to pay for the sin of my soul? God forbid. No! Simply this: “Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God”. The great prophetic summary, and our summons, this day and every day.

I am so glad you think these words so important that you sing them every time we come to the table of God’s grace.

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1. Frederick Buechner, “Gomer” in *Peculiar Treasures* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1979), pp.43-4.
 2. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, IV,I,184.