

The Healing of Justice, Mercy and Walking with God

Amos 5: 21:24; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 23:23

Today I offer a sermon on a song, the song we sing at the end of every communion service whose words come from Micah:

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

We might call it the triad of true religion. I like to call it the Whole Gospel of God.

At first the sermon was going to be about the healing of justice alone, but justice alone is not sufficient for our healing and the healing of the nation. So all three together, justice, mercy and walking humbly with God. The three together are the proverbial three-legged stool that needs all three to stand.

This whole gospel of God is a firm foundation for the church. Neal Grose posted that it is a good standard for reading and understanding the Bible.

Jesus thought so. He echoed Micah's words to the religious leaders of his day. "Woe to you", he said,

...for you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, (the Torah), justice, mercy and faith. (Matt. 23:23)

I

So we begin with justice. “Justice, justice you shall pursue, says the Lord”, repeating the word justice for emphasis. In ancient Israel justice was about the care for the most vulnerable. The poor, the widow, orphan and stranger. It was about fairness in the courts and honesty in the marketplace.

Amos was a champion of justice. He traveled all around the nation as a migrant farm worker and saw what was going on in the nation. “You sell righteousness for silver”, he said to the nation, and we count many examples of that today, one’s integrity going to the highest bidder. “You trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth.”—and we see the plight of the poorest in our nation.

Amos did not spare the religious leaders. Worship without justice was a sham. In our passage for today he passed along God’s words. (My translation)

I hate your potluck dinners and your pretentious worship services. Take away the noise of your hymns; to the melody of your of your musical instruments I will not listen. *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream!*

Every-flowing! And mighty! Martin Luther King let these words ring in his speeches and sermons. When we dam up the water of justice and righteousness the land begins to wither and die, the nation and the land itself.

The best thought experiment on justice I know I have shared with you before. It comes from philosopher John Rawls in his book on justice. It's in the form of a question: *In what nation, in what century would you choose to live if you could not choose where in that society you were born?* Eighth century B.C. Israel? First century Roman Empire? Over 90% of those in the empire were slaves. Nineteenth century England? 1950's America?

His point is, the more just a society is, the less it matters *where* in that society you were born. What about Statesville today?

Amos said God has dropped a plumb line of justice from heaven so we can know what *straight* is again.

We all grew up with a sense of justice. We have a *fairness meter* inside us. As children we cry, "No fair!" And our ideas of fairness applied to us alone. But as we grow morally, we care not only about fairness for ourselves, but fairness for others too. That's the direction God moves us.

We have a major issue in America today with justice, and it affects all policy discussions and judicial decisions. Can injustice be *systemic*, imbedded in our

social structures? Or, is it only a decision we make as persons? There are many in high places who disavow any claim that racism is systemic. The word “systemic” was even excised from A.P. curricula and SAT tests in response to those who refuse to acknowledge that sin and injustice are systemic and not just personal.

The Bible has a phrase for systemic sin: “The parents eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” And their children and their children.

Most churches avoid justice talk like the plague! But God calls us to do justice, the first of the triad of true religion, the whole gospel of God.

II

The second is *mercy*. Justice alone is insufficient for our healing and for the healing of the nation. We need mercy too. In God justice is always mixed with mercy. To paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr: Justice without mercy soon becomes something less than justice.

When Micah spoke about “loving mercy” he had these two things in mind. First, being merciful to those who need mercy. When have you needed mercy in your life? We all do, especially when we have failed in one way or another.

The second form of mercy is in deeds of mercy, the help we offer those in need with our acts of mercy. We build Habitat houses, we work with 5th Street (as some are doing today) or ICM.

Micah shows us the sacrifice God wants most in his triad of true religion. And it includes mercy. Jesus echoed this when he quoted the prophet Hosea:

Go learn what this means, “I desire mercy not sacrifice.”

Shakespeare captured the beauty of mercy in these words:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

God’s mercy to us is as the gentle rain. And we can be such mercy to others.

III

And now, “walk humbly with your God.” It is the third leg of the stool. *Humility is the door to true spirituality.* We feel our need for God. We recognize our human finitude, the limits of our power, wisdom and goodness.

Our passion for justice without humility can turn us into moral scolds and true believers who believe they know exactly what justice is and how to achieve it. Without humility our mercy can be patronizing and do harm not good.

Walking humbly for the church also means the cultivation of the spiritual life. We seek to encourage the spiritual life in prayer and worship and the

cultivation of spiritual practices. We plan things like prayer retreats, or spirituality retreats or Wild Goose Festivals or pilgrimages to Iona.

We learn to kneel in the deepest sense of the word.

IV

So Micah's words are a call for us to embody the whole gospel of God. It's the whole gospel that makes us whole as a church. We need all three, justice, mercy and the humble walk with God. We need each other in the Body of Christ because each of us may have one of these as their passion. Then together we can embody the whole gospel of God in Christ.

What if every Board and Committee would regularly ask in their planning, "Where are we doing justice here? Where are we loving mercy here? Where are we deepening the life of the Spirit here?"

There are some churches that are justice churches, majoring in justice. They are our witness to our need to do justice. There are mercy churches, churches that major in mercy and in mission to the needy. We need them to remind us of God's call to mercy. There are peace churches that major in peace, and there is no peace without justice and mercy.

There are churches that major in spirituality and spiritual practice. They remind us of the transcendent in life and the importance of life in the Spirit.

But God needs and the world needs churches that are devoted to all three. I think we are that kind of church, or strive to be. We may get out of balance from time to time. But that is our goal. And that is why we sing the song we do every month at Communion.