



Sermon Transcript August 2, 2020

Do Justice Justice: Something We Do Micah 6:8; 6:1-16

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Sermon Text
Micah 6:8

⁸ He has told you, O man, 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?

Micah 6:1-16

¹ Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² Hear you mountains, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel.

³ “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!
⁴ 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. ⁵ O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Peor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.

⁶ 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? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has told you, O man, 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?

⁹ The voice of the LORD cries to the city—and it is sound wisdom to fear your name: “Hear of the rod and of him who appointed it! ¹⁰ Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed?
¹¹ Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights? ¹² You rich men are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. ¹³ Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins. ¹⁴ You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you; you shall put away, but not preserve, and what your preserve I will give to the sword. ¹⁵ You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; and you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine. ¹⁶ For you have kept the statutes of Omri, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you have walked in their counsels, that I may make you a desolation, and your inhabitants a hissing; so you shall bear the scorn of my people.”

Introduction

Have you ever been sued? Have you ever been taken to court? We do live in a litigious culture; so it is a rather common practice to turn to the courts to seek restitution for whatever unjust action the plaintiff claims to have suffered. While this is a justifiable means for seeking justice, the courts have seen their fair share of frivolous lawsuits. For example, there was the magician who claimed to have patented his magical powers and he sued David Copperfield claiming that Copperfield used those “patented” magical powers without his permission. Then there was the man who sued Starbucks for adding ice to their cold beverages. The judge dismissed the case stating that it is reasonable to assume that an iced drink would contain both ice and liquid. My favorite one is a 69-year-old man who petitioned the courts because he felt like he was the victim of age discrimination when it came to getting a job. So he petitioned the courts to make him twenty years younger by changing the legal date of his birth. If it would only be that simple!

In our passage this morning, God is filing a lawsuit against his people, the people of Judah, the people of Jerusalem. It says at the end of verse 2 that “*the LORD has an indictment against his people.*” However, this indictment—this lawsuit—is far from frivolous. It is serious. God’s people broke covenant with God. One of the most common reasons for filing a lawsuit is when there is a breach in a contract. A “Breach of contract” occurs when someone fails to fulfill his or her duties under the terms of a contract. Israel failed to keep covenant with God, thus there was a “breach of contract” in their relationship with God.

If you recall, when God brought Israel to Mt. Sinai where he gave them the Ten Commandments, he made them into his people. God does say in Micah 6:2 that he is making this *indictment against his people*. In building his case against *his people*, God cries out with much emotion in verses 3 and 5, “*O my people . . .*” As the people of God, they entered into covenant with God and agreed to represent God to the world by the way they lived according to what God calls good. By the way they lived, they were to show the world what God is like. When God established this covenant with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, the people of Israel were willing partners and said *with one voice* in Exodus 24:3, “*All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.*” In turn they would bring the blessing of God to an unjust and broken world. Simply put, to obey God was their end of the covenant.

If you have been tracking with us this year, you know the story. Over and over and over again, Israel fails to keep covenant with God. And so in verse 1, God calls the mountains and the hills to bear witness against *his people*, who for generation after generation failed to keep covenant with God. If the mountains and hills could talk, they would give testimony to what they have seen in Israel generation after generation. They would verify that indeed there has been a “breach of contract” and that God has a case against his people.

In case you are wondering, God did more than keep his end of the covenant. God had promised to bless them. In verses 3-5, God reminds them how faithful and good he was to the people of Israel, in spite of their many shortcomings. In these three verses he lists four things that he did for them. He delivered them out of slavery in the land of Egypt. They knew what it was like to be enslaved, to be oppressed, to be the ones who experienced injustice. But God redeemed them from bondage and set them free. He gave them good leaders to shepherd them through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Moses, Aaron and Miriam faithfully led them during a very difficult time. He protected them from their enemies and those who sought to oppose them and curse them like Balak had called Balaam to do. And then, he brought them into the promised land as they crossed the Jordan River from Shittim to Gilgal. They have no room to make a charge against God or to complain that God has not been faithful. He says in verse 3, “*O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!*”

That is exactly what the people of Israel do in their defense against God’s charge against them. In verse 6-7 they answer God like the kid who has been told that he or she is in trouble but responds as if he or she is clueless that they have done anything wrong. “What?” “What did I do?” That is what the people of God are saying back to God. “What do you mean we have broken covenant with God? They say in verse 6 that they *bow before God on high*. We come to the temple. We attend worship. We even bring sacrifices. They even use exaggerated numbers to indicate the size of the sacrifices—big gifts—they make: *thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil . . .* And don’t forget we even dedicate our firstborn to God. “How much more do we need to give?”; they wonder. In other words, they were going through all the outward motions of worship thinking that in doing so they are keeping covenant and that God is obligated to bless them. We come to church. We say our prayers. We give our offerings. Besides, not too many people do that in New England, that has to count for something. What do you mean we are breaking covenant?

It is at this point that God makes his case. “*He has told you, O man, 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?*” At the center of God’s lawsuit against the people of Israel is the accusation that they fail *to do justice*. This is what it means to be the people of God in a broken world. *To do justice*. What does it mean to reflect the character of God to a broken world? *To do justice*. What is it that God takes so seriously that if it is absent our weekly worship and our songs of praise ring hollow? *To do justice*.

I want to ask three questions this morning

What does it mean *to do justice*?

Where does a passion *to do justice* come from?

What does the call “*to do justice*” mean for us at WEFC today?

What does it mean *to do justice*?

When we see the word *justice* we often think of retribution. When we say we are seeking *justice* what we often mean is that we want to see appropriate punishment for the crime that has been committed. In fact, the entire second half of our passage this morning is dedicated to this kind of justice—retribution. Because the people of Judah failed *to do justice* they were about to experience God’s retributive justice. God says to them in verse 13, “*Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins.*” That is one way the Hebrew word for *justice* can be used.

But when God accuses *his people* of failing *to do justice* he is not accusing them for failing to “send people to jail.” He is not accusing them for failing to be tough on crime and failing to execute retributive justice. In fact, the word for *justice* in Hebrew has a much wider and hopeful meaning than to seek punishment. In the Old Testament it is more widely used to refer to “restorative justice.” It conveys the idea of going out of your way to seek those who are being taken advantage of and lifting them up and helping them. If I could put it in a very simple way, doing justice means that I am willing **to make someone else’s problem my problem**. Often this involves caring for the most vulnerable.

It strikes me that when God brings his indictment against *his people* he says to them in verse 8 that they should know what they have been called to do because God has told them what they should do. He says to them, “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you.*” When God entered into covenant with Israel back in Exodus 22-23 he told them what it looks like to be *his people*.

What does it look like to be *his people*? He tells them to not wrong the sojourner—the immigrant. He reminds them in Exodus 23:9, “*You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*” That verse really jumped out at me this week. What is in *the heart of a sojourner*? What emotions occupy the heart of a sojourner? Israel knew what it was like to always be on the outside looking in. They knew the heart of fear that comes from being oppressed with no one to appeal to for help. They knew the heart of despair that comes with all the systemic obstacles that stood in their way and that were working against them and the limited access they had to advance. They knew the cry that comes from being treated unfairly simply because of their ethnicity or their status.

Isn’t that how the book of Exodus begins? As a new generation rose to power in Egypt it says that the Egyptians *ruthlessly made them work as slaves*. And it says in Exodus 2:23-24 that “*the people of Israel groaned . . . And God heard their groaning.*” But now that they are on the opposite side of power they must not misuse their power to oppress the sojourner or mistreat the widow and the orphan or neglect the poor. Instead they

must seek to lift them up. As God's people, they must use their power for the good of the one often neglected. They must **make someone else's problem their problem**. That is the essence of biblical justice. This was not news to them.

"He has told you, O man, what is good." Isn't that the essence of justice? It is *what is good*. God is good. One of my favorite verses is Psalm 34:8, *"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good."* How is the "goodness of God" described in this psalm? *"This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him . . . Oh, tastes and see that the LORD is good."* God calls his people to be like God. This is how God describes himself in Deuteronomy 10:17-18. *"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God."* Now listen to how God's greatness and might and awesomeness is described. *"He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing."* Clearly *executing justice* here is not retributive. Instead, the goodness and the greatness and the might and awesomeness of God is seen in how he hears the cry of the oppressed—*this poor man cried*—and he moves to restore and lift up the one who is in need. And so, in the very next breath he says to those whom he has made his people, who were to show the world what God is like, *"Love the sojourner therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."*

Instead of doing *what is good*, we have discovered in Micah 2:1 that those who are now in power lie in bed at night scheming how to work the system to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of others. So they get up in the morning and put their plans into action *because it is in the power of their hand*. Consequently, some benefit and some don't. As God brings his indictment against *his people* he doesn't mince words about how he feels about this. He calls this *wickedness* and he calls it *evil*. We find the same judgment again in our passage this morning. In verse 10 he says, *"Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked . . . Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bad of deceitful weights?"* The NLT says it this way, *"Will there be no end to getting rich by cheating . . . How can I tolerate your merchants who use dishonest scales . . . The rich among you have become wealthy through extortion and violence. Your citizens are so used to lying that their tongues can no longer tell the truth."* That is a sobering word, isn't it? This has become so much apart of you and your culture that you no longer can discern what is true. These prophets have a knack at making a person squirm.

Fleming Rutledge said, "Trying to understand someone else's predicament lies at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian."¹ Why are we talking about racism so much? As you can imagine, I have heard the full spectrum of responses to this series. I have heard everything from, "Thank you for talking about this! . . . Why are we still talking about this? . . . Why do we even have to talk about this?" We talk about this because we are Christians. We are God's people who represent a God who is good and who hears when the *poor man cries*. If we are going to *do justice* then we need to hear the

cry of the heart of the one who has experienced a long history of what it is like to have one obstacle after another to overcome. God said to Israel, *you know the heart of a sojourner*. They knew what it was like. When I read that I had to confess that as someone who is white, I don't know the cry of that heart. That is not my experience. How can I know that heart unless I stop to listen? How can I know that heart unless we talk about it and try understand the ways that this has become so much apart of us that we can't even see what is true? Can it be said of us what is said of God and his goodness. "This poor man—this suffering people cried . . . and we heard."

You know what is good and you know what God requires of us. It is *to do justice*. It is to lift up the one who suffers. It is **to make someone else's problem our problem**.

Where does the passion *to do justice* come from?

It is not natural for us to make someone else's problem our problem. Instead we are more inclined to be outraged when others don't make our problem their problem. Fleming Rutledge said, "To be outraged on behalf of oneself or one's own group alone is to be human." We are good at crying out for justice when we think an injustice has been committed against us or against our group. And when we make that cry, we can't understand why everyone else doesn't see what seems so obvious to us. She said that is a perfectly human reaction, "but it is not to participate in Christ." She adds, "To be outraged and to take action on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed, however, is to do the work of God."² That is *to do justice*.

But where does that passion come from? It comes from the grace of God. It comes from a **God who made our problem his problem**. Isn't that the appeal he makes to *his people* when he calls Israel *to do justice*? Based on the fact that God heard their cry and God delivered them from bondage in Egypt and brought them into the promised land, he calls them to in turn hear the cries of the sojourner, the widow, the orphan and the poor and to lift them up. Before he even gives them the Ten Commandments he frames these commandments with who he is and what he has done for them. "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself—Jesus said that is the essence of the commandments.

Stephen Um says that "had Micah been around today, he would have pointed us back to a different bedrock event in the history of God's people. He didn't have the privilege of seeing it, but we do, and we need to remember it."³ What do we need to see and remember? We need to see and remember Jesus and the cross. It is the place where God heard our cry and sent Jesus, the Son of God, **who made our problem his problem** by dying on the cross for our sin. Redemption!

Both expressions of justice are on display at the cross. Retributive justice is there as Jesus takes upon himself the wrath of God for our sins. If we had been taken to court by God, we would not be able to stand on our own. But on the cross Jesus took our judgment. He died in our place. He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. He who was rich emptied himself and became poor. Through faith in Christ, there is now no condemnation to those who believe. When we are brought into the courtroom and the enemy accuses us of our sin, we now have an advocate who stands at our side and rebukes Satan and says, “This one has been plucked by from the fire! Take off his filthy clothes and give him clean clothes. This one has been made clean!” Hallelujah!

But to what end has Jesus died for us? It is through the cross that God’s restorative justice is at work in us as well. We are now new creatures in Christ. The old way of life is gone. What is this new way of life that we are brought into? Paul says in Philippians 2 that we have the same attitude and the same heart and the same mindset that Jesus has towards us. We are no longer to consider ourselves better than others. That sin of “rankism” we talked about a few weeks ago is challenged and addressed through Jesus. Instead, with humility *don’t just look at our own interests, but also at the interests of others*. In other words, because through Jesus **God made our problem his problem** we are called to **make someone else's problem our problem**. As his people, we are to be about a restorative justice that restores a soul to God through the proclamation of the gospel and takes up the cause of the suffering through caring for the interests of others.

It is informative to see how Jesus is introduced to us in the gospels, the fulfillment of the hopes of the Old Testament. Jesus himself opens up the Old Testament scroll of Isaiah and introduces himself as the promised Messiah who comes to *preach the good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives . . . to recover the sight to the blind . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed*. It was the mother of Jesus, Mary, who sang a song of praise—the *Magnificat*—upon hearing the news that she, a lowly handmade, one of low estate, would give birth to Israel’s hope and the Savior of the world. She sang, “*he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden*.” Why? This is the way of God, who is good. She goes onto sing “*He scatters the proud . . . He puts down the mighty . . . He exalts those of low degree . . . He fills the hungry with good things*.” Don’t spiritualize these words in a way that you miss the heart and the character of God for lifting up the ones who are vulnerable and who suffer.

God says to his people, “*He has told you, O man, 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*.” When we walk humbly with God we recognize that had God not made our problem his problem, then we would have no hope. When he calls us to *love kindness* he uses a strong Hebrew word that describes a loyal love. Stephen Um calls it “an unqualified love; limitless love; stubborn, unceasing, dogged love that says, “I refuse to give up on you, even if

everyone else tells me I should. It is a loving kindness that says, I will not budge in my loyalty to you. I will stay with you even in the moments where there is nothing in it for me.”⁴ This is more than a random act of kindness. In fact, that sounds so shallow in comparison to the *loving* kindness—the loyal love—we are called to. This is love that steps into an exhausting issue like racism and fights to understand and endures even when the conversation is uncomfortable. It is what Christ does for us. **God made our problem his problem.** Jesus humbled himself, so humble yourself before God. Jesus is loyal to us, his *loving kindness* is stubborn to us, bearing with us even when we are not very loveable. So love like Jesus loves. And so it is a humble posture plus loyal love that produces a heart for doing justice.

What does the call “*to do justice*” mean for us at WEFC today?

We are the church. We are not just individuals living out our faith on our own. Christ forms us into a people—collectively living as one. We are an alternative society that reflects the character and love of God. Peter picks up on the image of the church being the people of God by using the words describing Israel at Mt. Sinai when they became the people of God. In 1 Peter 2:9 he calls us “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” So what would Jesus say to us? Would he be inclined to take us to court? Don’t think we are immune to the discipline of God. Jesus does say to the seven churches of Asia Minor, “*I know your works.*” He does say that there is the possibility of their light being taken away. We should at least expect Jesus to say to us what he said to *his people* in the Old Testament. “*He has told you, O man, 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?*” In other words, as the church of Christ **it should be no problem for us to make someone else’s problem our problem.**

This was at the heart of the early church. In Acts 2 we discover that while they were devoted to the matters of worship—the apostle’s teaching, communion and prayers—at the same time they were devoted to making sure everyone had everything in common and they sold what they had to care for the one’s in need. And this dramatic picture of an alternative society where there was neither rich nor poor, male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek—was so powerful that it spoke to the power of the message they proclaimed to the world. Jesus saves!

In our minds we are quick to affirm that the church is the only answer to the racial struggles of our day. At least we say that is the way it should be. But the more conversations I have with people of color the more I hear the testimony that broadly speaking, that has not been their experience. They often find more hope outside the church than they do inside it. It stings every time I hear it. But how do we get to the point where it is **no problem for us to make someone else’s problem our problem?**

I was moved this week when I read about the peaceful transition of power that took place in South Africa back in 1995. It was not an easy transition of power from the white regime of apartheid to Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. One of the roadblocks to peaceful transition was what to do with all the crimes—what Micah called wicked and evil in Micah 2:1—that had been committed against the black population of South Africa for all these years. The outgoing white regime wanted full amnesty. Mandela and the ANC would have none of it.

They came up with a compromise called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Full amnesty would be given only if there was full disclosure of the truth. For three years, the country sat through the painful story of atrocities that were confessed in great detail and at times without remorse. One of the unintended consequences of this was the exposure of atrocities that were committed on the other side as well. In fact, Nelson Mandela's ex-wife, Winnie, was implicated in this process. The TRC received a lot of criticism while it was unfolding and there were flaws in the process, but as historians look back on it they acknowledge the cathartic nature of the truth being told. Bishop Desmond Tutu said "It is not enough to say let bygones be bygones . . . Reconciliation does not come easy. Believing that it does will ensure that it will never be. We have to look the beast firmly in the eyes . . . Restorative justice is focused on restoring the personhood that is damaged or lost. But restoring that sense of self means restoring memory—a recognition that what happened to you *happened*. You are not crazy. Something seriously evil happened to you. And the nation believes you."⁵

When I read this story, I couldn't help but pause and ask, "does the church believe you?" How can we understand the heart of the *sojourner* - the pain of the Black experience unless we hear the heart? How can we discover what has been so much part of our norm growing up—the systems that we have benefited from while others haven't—that we have become blind to what is true—unless we take time to listen. And if reconciliation is "hard work" then how can we even begin "*to do justice*" if this isn't more than a passing sermon or two? And why should we enter this struggle and why should we seek to grow in our ability to show the world what it could look like to break down these dividing walls? Because we are Christians. It is because Jesus is the answer. It is because we are the people of God and we are given the task to show people what God is like. And what is God like? "*He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.*"

*He has told you, O man, 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? To do justice is to **make someone else's problem our problem**. It is what God did in sending Jesus. **God made our problem his problem**. Since we are the redeemed people of God, it is **no problem for us to make someone else's problem our problem**.*

Conclusion

Fifty-seven years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote these words from prison. It is part of this famous letter known as “The Letter from Birmingham Jail.” “Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was “well timed,” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words “Wait!” . . . This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never!” It has been the tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration.” I will not deny that this can be an exhausting and complex issue. But “to wait” is not an option for the church. The testimony of the gospel of Jesus forms a people who are one and who seek to reflect that character of God to the world. Thus we are called *to do justice*. We cannot wait any longer.

It begins with lament.

The root of the problem is sin and it is the gospel that roots out the problem.

The God of hope makes us a people of hope.

Because God made our problem his problem we have no problem making someone else’s problem our problem.

¹Fleming Rutledge *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)107

²Ibid., 143

³Stephen Um *Micah For You* (The Good Book Co: 2018) 120

⁴Ibid., 118-119

⁵Interview with Desmond Tutu, *Parade Magazine* January 11, 1998 quoted in Rutledge p. 120

