

Texts: Micah 6:8 and Matthew 25:35-40

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Place: MUC Combined Service

Theme: Summer Series – ‘To Act Justly’

Introduction

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” – Micah 6:8

Last Sunday we reflected together on, what it means to *walk humbly with God*.

Let’s recap. Micah paints the scene of a courtroom in which God is the prosecutor and the people are the accused. In delivering his prophecy, Micah alternates among the roles of narrator, the people and God.

To walk humbly with God is a call to do more than to come to God with offerings thinking to buy God’s favour, but to spend time walking, living life, with God in ways that would work out in every aspect of life.

To walk humbly with our God means to place our trust only in God as the firm foothold that holds us on the mountain of life.

To walk humbly with God is a deep desire to see the world through the eyes of God, to act in the world as God would act.

To walk humbly is the opposite of walking proudly or self-righteously, and invites us to the faith journey of self-giving, self-sacrifice, and self-emptying like Jesus.

If we walk humbly, then we acknowledge others who will be our companions along the way.

As Paulo Freire succinctly put it, *“Oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights,”* and dehumanization is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human.

In contrast, the command to walk humbly will lead us to the restoration of God’s image, and we all become agents of transformation in the world.

Another way to look at what it means to walk humbly with God is to recognise that *“God’s own walk is humble, and so, if one would walk the way of God, one must walk humbly.”* (Walter Brueggemann)

And I asked you to reflect on what *walking humbly with God* looks like for you in your situation and context? “He has told you, O mortal, 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, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God” according to Walter Brueggemann is to *“embody all that we need to know in order to be faithful and to be human.”* They are not three “virtues.” They are fundamentally not so much three things “things to do.” *“They speak of three dimensions of a life of faithfulness, each of which depends on and is reinforced by the other two.”* – Walter Brueggemann

Before we reflect together what it means to act justly let me share a story...

“A very proper lady went to a tea shop. She sat at a table for two, ordered a pot of tea, and prepared to eat some cookies which she had in her purse. Because the tea shop was crowded, a man took the other chair and also ordered tea.

As it happened, he was a Jamaican black, though that is not essential to the story.

The woman was prepared for a leisurely time, so she began to read her paper.

As she did so, she took a cookie from the package.

As she read, she noticed that the man across also took a cookie from the package.

This upset her greatly, but she ignored it and kept reading. After a while she took another cookie. And so did he. This unnerved her and she glared at the man.

While she glared, he reached for the fifth and last cookie, smiled and offered her half of it.

She was indignant. She paid her money and left in a great hurry, enraged at such a presumptuous man.

She hurried to her bus stop just outside. She opened her purse to get a coin for her bus ticket. And then she saw, much to her distress, that in her purse was her package of cookies unopened.”

What does it mean to “do justice” or to act justly? There are two words translated ‘just’ or ‘justice’ in the Hebrew Bible. The one used here in Micah 6:8 (*mišpāt*) very likely “referred to the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony in a community” ¹

The Hebrew word for “justice,” *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. It means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty. But *mishpat* means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights.

Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people’s income. This support is described as “the priests’ *mishpat*,” which means their due or their right. *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

Do you know that the Hebrew word, justice and judgement are one and the same, they are *mishpat*? I know most of us prefer the word *justice* more than the word *judgement*. Can we judge people and at the same time be champions of justice? However, scripture makes it clear that God is THE Judge. God seeks out and judges the heart of everyone.

In Psalm 96:10-11a, 13

Say among the nations, “YHWH reigns; Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.” Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice... Be before YHWH for He is coming; He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in His faithfulness.

¹ *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, pp. 1127–1129.

Notice that God's judgment is in the positive. It's not brimstone, and fire. God judges with equity. God judges in righteousness and in God's faithfulness. God judges to SAVE the humble of the earth. I know some progressives can't conceive a God who judges.

I have one simple question: *"If you believe that there is no such a thing as judgement where is justice for approximately six million European Jews and at least five million Soviet prisoners of war? There's no judgement for Adolf Hitler, Germany? For Joseph Stalin, Russia? For Idi Amin, Uganda? How can that be just?"*

Of course, if you don't believe there is a god, small or capital G or life after death than one doesn't need to wrestle with the issue of justice or judgement.

We see that there are various and conflicting understandings of justice.

Walter Brueggemann, an excellent Old Testament scholar offers a way the Bible thinks about justice: ***"Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them."***

I want to pause and reflect. Remember the story that I told in the beginning? The lady who thought that the Jamaican man was eating her cookies. Like her, sometimes we process things so long that do not belong to us that we come to think they are ours.

The word 'return' is key. It implies that those things that people are due have been taken from them, either by individuals, by groups, by fortune, or by unjust social and economic systems.

For the biblical writers, a just society is one in which those without protection—the weak, the homeless and voiceless ones—have been brought into the heart of the community to share its life and enjoy its goods. The contour of biblical justice is to provide the poor with access to the means of life. This is divine distributive justice.

Here's the thing about doing justice: It's messy. It's complicated.

For me at its heart, the Bible tells the story of a God who liberated an oppressed people from a powerful empire and created a remarkable covenant with them: to worship no other God and to demonstrate their devotion by creating a just society that would stand in contrast to the oppressive empires of the world.

And the essential nature of the covenant is to love God and to love your neighbour. When Jesus announced the kingdom of God, he was putting forth a vision of a world governed by love—more peaceful, more compassionate, more equitable, and more just.

Planted deep in our hearts, this dream defines our mission as followers of Jesus. We are called to transform the hearts, minds, and politics of our cities and towns, our states and nations, and the entire global community so that children everywhere will be fed, clothed, healed, and educated.

And good, faithful Christians can disagree about how to create a more just society. We can disagree about what issues are most pressing. And we can disagree about how to approach these issues. Again, you and I know that justice work is messy. And because of that, sometimes we can be tempted to ignore it altogether. But we can't. Because the God who is just requires it. And what I think doing justice boils down to is simply that we care about people that most others don't, especially those some choose to demonise.

In Matthew 25 Jesus called us to care for the "least of these."

We see in them "Christ in distressing disguise," as Mother Teresa put it.

However, to care for them we do not stop at giving them water to drink or food to eat when they are hungry or clothes to wear when they are naked but also address the systemic causes that might be creating more of the "least of these."

One more story, which might be familiar to some of you.

“Imagine you are walking along the bank of a rushing river when you spy a person in the water that seems to be drowning. Heroically, you leap into the water and save the person. So far, so good. A few minutes later, another person floats by that seems to be drowning. Once again, you jump into the river and save the person.

This keeps happening, again and again. In each case, you dive in, and though you manage to save the person each such time, doing so denies you the chance to go upstream and ascertain why all these people are getting into the water to begin with, for which you might be able to bring the matter to an overall halt and prevent anyone else from further getting into the dangerous waters.

To do justice or to act justly means that we need to rescue those who have fallen into the water, but it also means finding out why people are falling into the river in the first place and fix the causes.

Justice is not either/or but both/and.

To act justly we need to work toward creating a society where none are forgotten, where we sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them, where all are treated justly and equitably.