

Both Wide and Deep
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
January 29, 2017
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Texts: Micah 6.1-8;
Psalm 15;
1 Corinthians 1.18-31;
Matthew 5.1-12

As I hear reports back from people who engaged in marches last the word on the street from those who participated is that people are reinvigorated to come together as communities committed to social justice. People are feeling the urgency that the prophet Micah is holding out to us today: that what is good...and what the Lord requires of us is to "do justice."

When you get your newsletter for February, I encourage you to read Pastor Gordon's *And Finally* article. In it he shares his conviction that the concept of reconciliation must begin in this commitment to do justice. He shared that conviction last Sunday in his word with the children. If you weren't here last week or haven't read his article yet, he had two apples. He gave one to me and kept one for himself but then stole my apple. He asked the kids would it be enough for him to just say "I'm sorry, Jill" but then keep the apple he had stolen. They knew, of course, that it wasn't. That reconciliation is more than saying you are sorry but actually making amends and repairing the harm. Saying you are sorry and giving the apple back. He had several scenarios like this. Then finally he said, "Reconciliation also asks the question of why I had all the apples in the first place."

Reconciliation asks questions about justice and the structures that make the world a place where one person has all the apples and others don't have enough. There is a lot of energy right now bubbling up in many different places. You could be at a march every weekend it seems. There's one being organized for today at the Detroit airport. People are asking how we can

reconcile what feels so fractured in our communities and stand with those who are most vulnerable.

I can point to the urgency simply by looking at my calendar: we've had community conversations, new coalitions, clergy groups gathering. Gordon and I counted up probably 5 or 6 we are working with right now. There is ENERGY around this call to "Do Justice" and it is revealing just how wide the realm of reconciliation really is.

I am convinced that this recognition of the wide terrain must also be combined with a second recognition. A recognition that is embedded into these passages from both Micah and the gospel today. To get us in this second recognition I want to tell you about something that happened at Early Worship last Sunday. We were singing the hymn *For Everyone Born* which is a song we sang a few weeks in this service. I invite you to turn with me to that hymn in Purple #769. This is a beautiful hymn about the wide-open welcome of God's realm.

"For women and men a place at the table, revising the roles, deciding the share, with wisdom and grace, dividing the power, for woman, for man, a system that's fair...for young and for old....a right to belong."

We come to the end of verse three and time has grown short and we can see adult folks in the hall waiting to come in and set up (something that will stop happening when the chapel is done!) So the song leader did what I had done the week before: "let's skip to verse 5." When we got done someone said "can we please sing verse 4?" Listen to what verse 4 says:

"For just and unjust a place at the table, abuser, abused, with need to forgive, in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy, for just and unjust, a new way to live."

This is the deep, soulful work of reconciliation: the mindset of mercy. I'm convinced that as the energy for the wide terrain of social justice pulls us into action, we need to be as attentive (maybe more attentive) to this deep, soulful work of reconciliation at the same time. I need to say something about that hymn. I feel the need for this every time we sing it. That line "abuser, abused, a need to forgive." I'm aware of the potential trigger in

that line. If you are being abused or have been, please come talk to me about what this line “a need to forgive” does and does NOT mean. I’d be honored to walk with you as you find a new way to live: a place where you can be safe. I’d be equally honored to walk with you if you recognize that you have become abusive as you get help to find a new way to live.

This is complicated work; having the mindset of mercy as you do justice. That’s what God is calling us to in the book of Micah: it’s not just “Do justice.” There are two additional pieces in this iconic mission statement from Micah.

I want to dwell now with these two additional pieces because they push us into the deep work of reconciliation. The first of these is rendered in our text as “love kindness.” The word in Hebrew is *chesed*. This word does not have a simple English equivalent. It gets translated as kindness in our text. It usually describes God’s character and appears 243 times in scripture. I listened to a Rabbi talk about the cluster of words that taken together get close to the meaning of this word¹: mercy, compassion, grace, kindness, love and steadfast love, unfailing love, and loving kindness.

Here is the rub for me as I watch the energy building to “do justice.” I am going to describe the rub as I have experienced it inside myself. I leave it to you to decide whether this ever happens for you or whether you think it is happening in our society at large. I don’t want this to be finger pointing. I want this to be an invitation to join me in self-reflection. When my energy to “do justice” runs high and I am with others who are in the same mode, I notice an edge of arrogance that begins to creep into my own spirit. And I notice an energy of rivalry that puts people into fixed categories of “for” or “against.” I want to be careful about that place. I want to be careful about believing I am the prophet who sees from on high and corrects everyone else in their injustice.

When I read through Micah it becomes clear that we will only understand what God views as justice when we first recognize our deep need for God’s

¹ Interesting discussion of the meaning of the Hebrew word *chesed* by Rabi Gene Binder https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muN_cKBmg4o

steadfast loving kindness. None of us is truly just. All of us depend on loving kindness, mercy, forgiveness, grace. When I remember that when I regularly review the truth of my life and how often I have failed or how dependent I am on God's guidance and correction (how much I need people calling me out) then it pushes me to walk humbly with God so that I can be open and receptive to God's teaching and correction. When I let God help me see my own vulnerability and need this makes me more alert to other people's vulnerability and need which in turn pushes me to do justice. The movement of this verse is circular and not linear.

There's a very good reason why Micah put "do justice" first. It's because the people in his day just like all of us have a tendency to think that loving kindness and walking humbly with God can be satisfied by a few personal, spiritual practices. In Micah's day it was the offering of sacrifices in the temple. For us it might be going to worship or reading the bible or giving money to charity. As long as I do those things I can do what I want and live my life.

God through Micah says "NO!" Loving kindness and walking humbly - this is the deep, soulful, and complicated work that transforms us from the inside out so that we cannot just live our life without asking why someone has all the apples and others don't have enough. I would say to those of us who do get this call to "do justice" and who are very alert to the reality that some have all the apples and others don't have enough - that for us - for me - we also need to tend how loving kindness and walking humbly with God transforms HOW we seek to do justice.

This season of reconciliation is a demanding one. I feel it every year because the terrain is both wide and deep.

So my invitation today is not to feel overwhelmed or overworked. But instead to shift our gaze to the *chesed* of God and hear the Beatitudes for what they are....promises. Promises of blessing.

What is wide and deep? The steadfast, unfailing love of God! It will sustain us, forgive us, and fuel us in this and every day ahead.
Thanks be to God!