

“The Circles of Justice and Faith”
Micah 6:8
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Good morning friends! While our verse for today is Micah 6:8, I’m going to start by reading vv. 1-8. I invite you to hear these words from the prophet:

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

³ “O my people, what have I done to you?
In what 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 now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving 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 mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God?

Today we begin a sermon series that invites us to revisit and reconsider the values of Seattle First Baptist Church - beyond a vision or even a mission, these values are our DNA, our ways of being. If our congregation was a tree, these values would be the roots we seek to deepen that make it possible to expand our branches out to one another, to our community, to the world. Our first value reads: "We will go deeper in faith as we do justice, love mercy, work for peace and walk humbly with God." It's pulled almost as a direct quote from Micah 6:8, our key verse for today, that last one I just read,

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?"

Besides their nearly identical phrasing, they are also similar in their summarizing of ideas, stories, histories much more extensive and complex than they initially let on. They do their best to compress an entire community's covenant to the divine and to creation into an easy to read, easy to understand sentence. But as we're all well aware, what led to this value for SFBC comes with a long history, countless names, some remembered, some forgotten, struggles, victories, and too many mundane moments in between to recall.

This verse in Micah, similarly, comes with an entire context which shapes its meaning and message. The verse doesn't just simply appear in the book as an assignment to the people of God, but instead is posed as a question that hearkens back to a convoluted history between God and Israel.

Leading up to our verse for today, the prophet Micah has showed up in Judah and doesn't mince words when it comes to calling out the gross economic injustices that are rampant in the land. After benefitting from the threat of Assyria, Judah finds itself in a time of prosperity. Although they must pay a big tribute to Assyria, material wealth among the elite is growing, the wealthy are thriving, and yet...those same people are taking advantage of the poor, oppressing them regularly by seizing their land for their estates and forcing them into labor to benefit the wealthy, and to pay that big tribute to Assyria. This means that those at the margins, the people of Judah most in need, are homeless, poor, destitute, and only growing more so as the abundance of the most affluent of Judah is built on the backs of those they are oppressing. Is any of this sounding familiar church?

When we get to chapter 6 of Micah, God is calling forth a kind trial of the people of Judah, guilty of such extreme acts, to hold them accountable and shake them from their imperial way of operating. But, rather than bring forward evidence of their abuse, God instead chooses to recount God's own actions toward Israel back to them - indeed, not maneuvers of tyrannical mistreatment, but bold moves of liberation and salvation. To show Israel their gaps, God's evidence is to cycle through times in which she showed up and filled in the gaps for them. Out of slavery in Egypt, with the help of Moses and Aaron and Miriam, from the plotting of Balak king of Moab, to their journey from Shittim to Gilgal. And through this monologue, you can hear God's heart through the legal metaphor - "My people, what have I done to you? Answer me." God doesn't lead this interaction accusingly with, "why have you done x, y, and z?" God says, "what have I done to you?". There's a kind of contrast between the initial framing of a courtroom

scene in which God is both plaintiff and judge, the mountains and hills the witnesses and this heart cry straight from Creator to creation – “What have I done to you? Answer me”. It denotes desperate emotion much deeper than courtroom jargon and reveals the heart of a God pleading with their people to remember the covenant between them. It seems as though recounting God’s faithfulness might be a more convincing argument than recounting the missteps of Israel.

So, how do God’s people respond? Do they respond with a bowing down, a crying out of lament over their actions? Are their hearts again turned back to God and in response dismantle their systems of oppression? Nope. When God calls for a defense from them, they bite back with queries of exaggerated offerings. Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Perhaps the Lord would 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?”. When God demands a defense of Israel for their actions, for breaking covenant, for misusing and abusing people and resources, they have no defense to give. So, they resort to this sarcastic retort in lieu of authentic accountability. Is any of this sounding familiar, church?

All of this brings us to our verse for today, that well-known verse 8, the verse from which our first value as a body of faith roots itself and is God’s response to Israel’s flagrant disregard for the devastating effects of their actions – God has told you...what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God? This verse that is so often extrapolated from its context and used as a refrain from Christians of all traditions and political parties to declare their dedication to the work of God, often with good intentions, is actually a verse in which God is calling out the sins of his people and again reminding them of the truth they already know – that God doesn’t give a crap about elaborate sacrifices, God cares for the least of these and cares if her people are caring for the least of these. And so the verse that is so often recited like a declaration was actually spoken as a question. “What does the Lord require of you?” But to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God?”

What strikes me as I read and unpack this passage from Micah is the cyclical nature of the account on several levels. God circles back to times when Israel was spared or saved. God circles back to their covenant with Israel and the basic tenants of that agreement. Even for the people of God themselves, this narrative of them getting it wrong, missing God, and having to be corrected and put back in order is cyclical! We see it again and again and again throughout the Hebrew Bible. And verse 8, God’s reminder to Israel is like a car on a racetrack, looping back again...” He has told you”, you already know, what does the Lord require of you? Several scholars will say that even the requirements of God – doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly is an echo of the covenant between God and Israel, hearkening back to the days of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Not only that, but themes will be circled back to again in the Gospels, in the words of Jesus to love God, people and self. And in instruction and example of caring for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the imprisoned. And will continue to be revisited by writers of the New Testament like James when he says, “what is true religion? To care for the fatherless and the widow.” What I’m getting at friends is that God, faith, spirituality, life is cyclical. Just as this planet we cohabitate on circles around the sun, so is the way of life and faith.

And as we call on this ancient text to inform our modern values, I can't help but also notice how parallel our worlds are. An ancient world of the prophet Micah in which the elite are getting wealthier by the minute off the labor and exploitation of the poor – leaving so many without homes and basic rights and needs met – that doesn't sound far off from the world waiting to greet me when I walk out of church today and pass by a soul sitting outside the Starbucks Roastery, whose body is without a home, without consistent nutrition and income, without access to basic hygiene while those with the most power, money and resources to break the cycle of poverty, only seem to continue in their efforts to increase the number of people sitting alongside that person outside the coffee shop. That description of Micah's world could easily be swapped with our own. But just as all of those cycles are parallel, so is the dialogue between Israel and the divine with our own community as we circle back to our values and ask the question, "What does the Lord require of us?". Now I don't mean to imply that to ask this assumes that explicit wrong is being done by us. In fact, it was interesting for me to write this message for today and work out how to challenge our community to think critically about how we're living into and living out this first value because by my own personal standards – we're doing great! You see, for those who don't know, I come from conservative small towns in southern Illinois – from churches and communities who, while mostly well-intentioned, would not welcome me to be openly queer at least without sacrificing the opportunity to preach or lead in ministry. I come from spaces where saying Black Lives Matter or having a BLM sign in the church yard results in arguments and vandalism and the eventual removal of said sign. I've worked in churches who see it as an inconvenience or a threat to to financially support ministries outside the bounds of what the highest-tithing congregants or the board wants – which sometimes has been a cosmetic facelift for the church over support to those in crisis. So, to come to a community like SFBC, where I can serve with the church at PrideFest, or openly speak against white supremacy without fear of retaliation. A place where friends like JJ, who was here a couple of weeks ago and runs a program that feeds people weekly can be supported by us financially and by access to a kitchen that allows them to feed even more people – that sounds and looks and feels like justice and mercy to me – and it is! And all of that and more that this congregation is doing is worth celebrating! This circling back doesn't just have to mean critiquing, it can also mean affirming the work that is being done! And it is being done.

And... perhaps it's for communities like ours, who are enacting justice and mercy, that the bit about walking humbly is also included. Humility to acknowledge that the work of justice and mercy are never perfected or complete, only continued and improved upon. Humility to recognize that for all the ways we "get it right", there will always be blind spots. Humility to be accountable to ways in which we still, against our best efforts, are complacent in systemic oppression. Humility to name and know that we cannot do the work of justice and mercy apart from each other or apart from God.

I encourage us to embrace this opportunity to circle back to our value of doing justice, loving mercy, working for peace, and walking in humility, To celebrate the ways in which we have done that, especially in the ten years since these values were established. To know our history and to name it as good and holy work. And, I invite us to consider, converse, and collaborate in

deepening this work in both big and small ways, so that we may reach even further with outstretched of love and embrace for all. Amen.

Benediction:

As I was pondering this idea of circling back and cycles, I was reminded of this poem by Rainer Maria Rilke and I'd like to offer it as part of the benediction:

"I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon, a storm or a great song?"

My prayer for us, is that we would live our life in widening circles, reaching further and further out towards those pushed to the margins, even those within our own community. And as we do that, may we find that we are also circling God and drawing ever closer to the heart of Creator Spirit. May we recognize that the actions required to move out to others and in towards God are not two sets of labor, but are, in fact, the very same motion. Amen.