

Righteousness

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

September 27, 2020

Micah 6:6-8 (adapted from the Inclusive Bible)

“What shall I bring when I come before God, and bow down before God on high?” you ask. “Am I to come before God with burnt offerings? With year-old calves? 7 Will God be placated by thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Should I offer my firstborn for my wrongdoings— the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8 Listen here, mortal: God has already made abundantly clear what “good” is, and what God needs from you: simply do justice, love kindness, and humbly walk with your God.

Matthew 5:6-12

6 ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Let’s talk about being hungry for a moment.

Have you ever been hungry?

I mean, so hungry you could feel it in your stomach, so hungry it distracted you, so hungry it made you dizzy?

The kids in this school were hungry, their teachers discovered, not most of them, but any kid who is hungry will break a teacher's heart, and there were a bunch in this school.

It's a common story. You've heard it before, the kids were hungry, but what could be done? Free lunches offered by the school. The teachers brought in granola bars and oranges and watched the kids go home on Fridays knowing that they would come in even hungrier on Monday morning.

The kids were not alright. They were hungry.

Which made the teachers hungry, hungry not for food but hungering and thirsting for righteousness, so hungry they could feel it in their stomachs, so hungry it made them dizzy.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Some of the teachers talked to some of the parents, and they got hungry, too. And some of the churches heard about it, and my goodness, hunger and thirst for righteousness spread until there was a plan:

No child at that school would be hungry during the school day, no child at that school or their family either, would be hungry on the weekend, every child would eat all through the summer.

Suddenly one of the teachers was pushing back all the tables in her room on Friday afternoons for a pop up food pantry...and then they were raising money for the school secretary to have cheese sticks and fruit at her desk. Then the churches were working together with the town food pantry.

You know, church people have food on the brain. Not only is feeding people sacred and central to us, we've got that story of 5,000 people being fed that allows us to imagine a world where no one is hungry.

Then the next school over was ready for the healthy snack program, and then the whole town. You see where this is going...

That was 2014, and Zac was a first grader when all of this was starting up at his school so we got to watch all this unfold in our school, in our town, and it was beautiful - indeed ArlingtonEATS is still going strong, having partnered up with the food pantry. In the midst of a pandemic of virus and hunger, they are feeding people.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

When those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled, the hungry are filled, too.

It doesn't have to be physical hunger, of course, that makes us hunger for righteousness.

Walter Brueggemann, a great UCC Bible scholar, talks about what underlies the Micah passage we all know by heart. "To 'do justice' (mispat) is to be sure that the neighbor is well provided for..."¹ He goes on to say

The two terms, mispat and hesed, stand at the center of Israel's faith-talk. Indeed mispat most often comes in a pair with sedeqah (righteousness) and hesed most often comes in a pair with 'amunah ("faithfulness.")...[so] we are given Israel's two most important word pairs, "justice and righteousness," "steadfast love and faithfulness," that echo with love of neighbor and love of God.²

For Micah, justice is about caring for the poor and those who are vulnerable. And walking humbly with God is walking God's path, God's way. Brueggemann likes the phrase "other-centered solidarity" as a companion to walking humbly with God.³ I think of Micah's exhortation this way: if I want to find myself in God's presence, I will love and serve my neighbor. I will go beyond charity and into God's vision of justice, that is to say, the kingdom.

Jesus would have known this prophet and the other instructions of the Hebrew bible, which balance and indeed combine love of neighbor with love of God.

It doesn't have to be physical hunger, but right now, there's a lot of physical hunger in our world. You have read the same headlines I have: Food pantries seeing more clients. One in ten households with children are food insecure in the US. We haven't yet

¹ Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2010. "Walk Humbly with Your God: Micah 6:8"

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

seen the worsening economic impacts of this crisis. Yet, there is and will be plenty of food to go around. We may be in crisis but we are still blessed with abundance.

It doesn't have to be physical hunger, but I do know a lot of Pilgrims who hunger to see their neighbors fed, folks who work the interfaith garden, support the food pantry, help LexRap, deliver for FoodLink, walk in the CROP Walk even in a year we can't walk as a big group. And I know other Pilgrims meeting human needs, hungering and thirsting for a world where everyone has enough.

You might think, I haven't done that. But if you're here, and you support this church, you have indeed. If you give to the special offering Neighbors in Need next week, you have indeed. Our Mission committee works on your behalf to support many different groups that a meeting human needs.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for in their hunger, in their vision for a world without hunger, others will be filled.

Just one more note about this beatitude. The first few beatitudes are passive - when you experience difficulty, here's a word of hope. This one, and the next few, are active... If the poor in spirit are encouraged, the mourners comforted, the meek strengthened....perhaps Jesus could see them becoming kingdom builders, people of vision, courage and strength. People who can do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.