

Micah 3:5-12 ⁵ This is what the LORD says: "As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him. ⁶ Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them. ⁷ The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God." ⁸ But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin. ⁹ Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right; ¹⁰ who build Zion with bloodshed, and Jerusalem with wickedness. ¹¹ Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us." ¹² Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

Matthew 23:1-12 When Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries {5 That is, boxes containing Scripture verses, worn on forehead and arm} wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' ⁸ "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. {10 Or Messiah} ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

"But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin;" when I hear these words I cannot help but hear Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath teaching in the synagogue on the day they ran him out of town. If you remember, Luke accounts that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stands up to teach. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah. I'm sure he kissed it and rolled it to the passage that reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). After reading that passage he tells them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). They were amazed at the "gracious words" he spoke, but as they all knew he was Joseph's son, the carpenter's boy. Their amazement soon turned to anger when Jesus told them that no prophet is welcome in his own

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hometown and that he would do no miracles in their midst as he had elsewhere in Galilee. They formed a mob and pressed upon him forcing him to the edge of the steep hill that the town was built on so that they could throw him off, but he somehow managed walk through the midst of them and left town.

The Spirit of the LORD – when the Spirit speaks it will without fail have something to do with justice, whether it is the justice of calling people to account for their sins or of proclaiming Good News. If the Holy Spirit speaks it then we must ask what justice is and that leads me to say that the biblical idea of justice is not the same thing as our idea of justice. For us justice is a legal term where the innocent are proclaimed innocent, the guilty get what they deserve, and the victim receives fair restitution. Yet, in the Bible justice is more than simply being fair. Moreover, it goes beyond advocating for those who have been denied their rights or have been oppressed. Justice is more than simply doing one’s duty where we kick back like members of Possum Lodge on the Red Green Show and pledge, “I’m man. I can show justice; if I have to; I guess.” Justice is the passionate craving to do loving-kindness to all people at all times.

If there is any sure sign that the Spirit of the LORD has hold of us it is that suddenly we find ourselves passionately craving to do loving-kindness, to do justice because this is what Jesus himself does and if he is in us then we will do as he did. The justice that Jesus brought and brings with his reign goes way beyond the right to courtroom fairness or a duty to be fair. To give you a picture, when John the Baptist sent some disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was the Messiah, Jesus answered, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Lk. 7:22). Jesus spent his time healing, restoring people’s lives to them that they might live with dignity within their communities. That’s justice. Justice is exercising loving kindness as a Holy Spirit initiated exercise of the reign of Jesus Christ that restores us broken, sin-burdened people to a dignified life.

Backing up into Micah for a moment, Micah says that he is filled with the Spirit of the LORD, with justice and the authority to tell the leaders of Israel that they are transgressing the bounds of justice that God has established. In his day the leaders were the wealthy patrons or lords, the king and his family, and the priests. Now, one thing you will find in the writings of the prophets is that justice is something God expects particularly from those who are leaders, those who are in a position of power and influence over others. God holds community leaders accountable for how justice is lived in the entirety of the community. Just for the sake of example, one teaching from the New Testament is that the leaders of the congregation are accountable to Christ for the conduct of the people they minister to. If our people carry on in a way that is contrary to Christ’s nature and we say nothing, we are complicit with them.

Therefore, God’s demand for justice is to be lived out by the leadership of the people. Authentic church leadership will burn passionately for justice, for loving-kindness to be the heart of the church community and indeed they will model it before the congregation and by God’s grace, Jesus gives us the Holy

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Spirit who molds and shapes our hearts for this task because our inclination is otherwise.

Looking at Matthew, Jesus also confronted the leaders of Israel in his day, particularly the religious leadership. In this passage, Jesus instructs his disciples concerning the Pharisees. Pharisaism was the most predominant form of the Israelite faith in Jesus day. They were very devout, very concerned to live a righteous life. Their downfall was that they tried to live the righteous life by obeying to the tee the laws of the Old Testament rather than pursuing justice. They got very legalistic and lacked a passion for justice, for loving-kindness. They taught the Law but had not hearts to obey it and so they found ways around it. Our relationship to God isn't based on following the rules. It is based on God's loving-kindness towards us and our living accordingly towards each other.

Jesus here teaches that humility paves the path to justice. He says, “the greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. The Pharisees were trying to live the righteous life, the just life, by their own ability to follow the rules and wound up stinking like dead corpses in God's eyes because of their hypocrisy. The heart of Jesus' teachings to his disciples and how they are to model justice is by humbly serving one another.

Next Sunday, we are again going to Evangel Hall to serve dinner. This is a good thing to do. But we must question whether or not our motives stray from justice. But what makes it justice, what makes it loving kindness isn't that we who have are providing food for those who have not. Rather, what makes it justice is that we wait the tables, that we talk to the people and listen to their stories, that we regard them as real people and give them dignity, and that we worship with them. Anybody with a little bit of means can throw money at another human being to meet their needs, but that's not justice, not loving kindness. In fact, it's kind of arrogant. Justice comes about when we regard others with loving-kindness because that's what God does towards us all. Being the servant of all others rather than the servant of self is the Truth that Jesus has to teach us. It is who he is and be the gift of his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, it is who we are. Amen.