

A Just Life

Text: Micah 3:8-12, 4:6-7, 6:6-8

(June 29, 2008 @ Northminster Church, Contemporary)

Over the past several weeks, we have asked a lot of big questions. About the Kingdom of God: What is it? How is it different from the kingdoms on Earth? We've talked about who God is and the story God has been writing from the beginning of creation.

Benny has been working through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and started our summer off with a look at who is blessed according to Jesus—the poor in spirit, the meek. Eugene Peterson has played around with that wording a bit in his *Message* paraphrase:

MATTHEW 5:

3"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

6"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

7"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

8"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

Then we heard from Louie for three weeks and heard more about this STORY. God is beckoning us to participate in the story of his work in the world. Your life story and my life story somehow connect and point to the ultimate story that God is still writing. Even the universe itself shows evidence of God's careful crafting. In all of this, Louie said, God offers us hope. God is present with us, particularly in our suffering.

For the next four weeks we are going to ask some "So What" questions. So what does it mean to participate in God's story? So what does it look like to be part of God's kingdom? So what does it mean that God wants us to live in this kingdom now on earth, not just later on heaven?

So what do all of these questions and concepts mean for my life, my real life in the real world? When it costs \$60 to fill my car up with gas and \$100 to buy six items on my grocery list, it's easy to get really focused on the narrow strip of sidewalk that's right in front of me. When electricity costs are jumping by 18% and upcoming winter gas costs will be up by 30%...it's easy for our worlds to get really small, really fast. We get lost in our own minor discomforts and start to forget about the larger impacts down the street, in the next town, or across the room at church.

Even when the economy is good, life is still full with children and work and school and church and sports and mortgage and bills. In the next four weeks, we'll ask, "How can I merge all of this God and kingdom talk into my real life?" or maybe even better, "How does this conversation reshape and reform my real life?"

I was pondering these questions yesterday when a brief encounter broke my focus. It always seems to happen when I'm scrambling to get a sermon finished. Maybe it's because I work in public places like coffee shops, or maybe it's because I tend to work under the pressure of last minute reflection. Or maybe there's a sign over my head that says, "PLEASE, STARE AT ME AND TRY TO ENGAGE ME IN CONVERSATION EVEN THOUGH I'M CLEARLY DOING SOMETHING!"

This time I was back at Stir Crazy, whose owners do not give me a discount for the public advertising I do for them, and I chose the least social seat in the place—a table with bad lighting tucked into a corner and literally facing a blank wall. A young man was wandering around near the cream and sugar and sort of stopped and stared at me. I didn't look up, but I knew he was staring at me. And just by peripheral vision I could tell that he had some physical disabilities. He spoke up, "Hello!" I nodded and quickly offered, "Hey. How are you?" In the way we all do when we want to be polite but don't really care how the person is. "Oh, I'm okay, but this thing is a pain in the butt," he said as he knocked on the cast on his leg. "I'm sorry to hear that," I responded, now turning back to my computer screen. He didn't seem bothered by my disinterest and simply moved on, greeting people along the way.

Maybe now you're thinking, "Why would such a horrible human being be invited to preach at Northminster?" I truly have no idea. But I do know that this exchange happens all the time, and my response to this young man is all too common to each of us, particularly when the person approaching us is visibly broken in some way. When it's someone asking for money, looking for conversation, eager for human contact...we sense that need, and very few among us face that encounter with grace. Why is that? What causes that, "Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me." vibe that we start sending out? Maybe our discomfort with the visibly broken—the severely mentally ill, the Vet who begs on the street corner—is that the exchange serves as a mirror. This man stands before me as a visible representative of my inner brokenness. And, more often than not, I don't want to face that.

As much as I'd love to blame our Western culture for this fear of others, this is not just a byproduct of mass-consumption and our drive to surround ourselves with pleasant things, pleasant conversation, and pleasant people. Scripture is filled with stories of people who were pushed to the edges of dominant culture, the margins of society. Cultural rules and norms often forced the ill, the blind, and those with various disabilities to remain outside of mainstream life and mainstream religious practice. The prophets, in the Old Testament, talk about how God will restore these outsiders one day, and Jesus ends up surrounded by

outsiders and outcasts for the bulk of his ministry. It's not just those with literal, physical barriers and limitations, but it's the invisible barriers and limitations of poverty, too. It's all those who don't have a voice in the society around them.

That's why I love *Yertle the Turtle*. It's not officially scripture, sure, but isn't it Gospel? Part of my covert agenda today is to make *Yertle the Turtle* a new parable for the Bible. We'll add it behind the maps of Paul's journeys right in the back.

Mack the Turtle is speaking up for the little ones, for the least of these. He's using his voice for what is right. And just as important, he's not a king or a corporate VP or a policy wonk; he's a regular turtle down on the bottom. His voice has power because he speaks truth for so many. This truth-speaking kind of voice is one dimension of justice as the Biblical writers describe it, and that's our starting point for the next few weeks.

When we talk about justice, sometimes we're thinking of our judicial system. It's the Supreme Court making a decision about the right to bear arms, it's the guys on *Law & Order* catching and prosecuting criminals. But that's not really what scripture means when the words "just" and "justice" are used.

"Justice is one of the most outstanding attributes of God in scripture." God is depicted as herald of justice (one who announces news or that something important is going to happen), God's ways are just, and "the righteous are called to mirror God's justice, for the Lord loves the just."¹ That means those who are seeking to live like God, to follow Christ, those folks are *called* to this way of justice.

I'll quickly fly through some of these texts, and all of this will **hopefully** be up on the new blog on our web site this week for those who want to read them again.

Ps. 37.28, For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off;

Gen. 18.19, For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Deut. 27.19, "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Jer. 22.3, This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: Justice* (pp. 474ff.)

Prov. 28.5, Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

“Justice is often considered a synonym for fairness, but often God’s justice equals not what is fair but what is right.” and with a large portion of mercy. Scripture repeats this image of God as being just, doing what is right, AND emphasizes that God’s followers are expected to participate in this work of justice.

You should have received a resource sheet this morning with names of books, web sites, activities, and passages of scripture. This list is forming out of conversations that are happening all over our community here and if you’re interested, it will inform this sermon series. I asked some friends for input and gathered the rest based on repeating conversations. We’ll add to it over the next few weeks. It isn’t homework, it truly is meant to be a resource for those of you who want to do some further study, get involved in good, life stuff that’s happening around here, or ponder thoughts and questions after you go.

If you’re already reading or listening to some of the people on the resource sheet, or if you’ve talked to people around here who are reading these folks, then you’re at least familiar with some of this justice language. Whether it’s the language of social justice, liberation theology, or Irresistible Revolution, there are certain passages of scripture that commonly appear in these writings and sermons. That’s where we’re going to land over the next few weeks. What is the biblical picture of God’s justice work? How are we to be involved in it? What does that look like in our lives and in our community.

So this morning, let’s move to the prophet Micah for a bit.

MICAH 6.6-8

‘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? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ 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?

Micah was a common man and is described by one pastor as “a rough, tell-it-like-it-is preacher.”² In this passage, he is addressing questions about rituals of sacrifice. It was a common practice of his day to bring burnt offerings to God to ask for forgiveness. The tradition started with Moses, but people had come to believe that “you had to make peace with God by doing some ritual steps. You had to get a sacrifice. You had to get a priest to prepare it. You had to go to a certain place to make offering. And if you could get all the pieces in place, you would be ‘right with God.’”

² Sherman, Cecil. *Formations Commentary: Psalms-Malachi*. Smyth & Helwys, 2006.

Where did people get their objects of sacrifice? “Micah saw that rich people could make sacrifice with more ease than poor folks.” And, “being genuinely sorry for sin was not always present in the sacrifice. What you had to have was a pigeon, a ram, or a lamb. You had to pay the priest. You had to get to the temple. And then the results were assured.”

Micah is challenging the spirit or the essence of the practice through his questions. When faith practice becomes more about flying through a check-list than about life formation, we have a problem. Do we do this? What does our check-list look like? The very practices that should strengthen and form faith—regular meditation and study of scripture, regular fellowship with a small group, regular worship with the larger community, honoring God through the way we use our resources—sometimes those practices can become a check-list. Right?

So Micah is challenging the notion of what will really please God. A calf? Why not thousands of rams or rivers of oil? (This is sort a real reference to the wealthy kings who could afford such extravagance.) Why not my firstborn child? (And he’s not being completely sarcastic here, either. Some people really did attempt this in neighboring cultures.)

At this point in time in Micah’s context, about 700 years before Christ, the matter of sacrifice had lost its essence. He goes on to remind us that God has already and always told us what is good. God is not changing the rules. What does God want from me? No thing at all. “The answer makes clear that what God does want is me!”³ God would have from God’s people a certain way of living. And what does this way of living look like? Micah offers three parts: Doing, Loving, Walking.

DOING: to do justice

“Justice is something one does. To do justice means to work for the establishment of equity for all, especially the powerless.” When we open ourselves up to this way of living, this faith practice of seeking justice, “We see wrong we have never noticed” before.⁴ One long-time pastor puts it this way, “We see people getting a raw deal, cheated, worked hard, and paid little. We see institutional unfairness. It bothers us. It eats on us. It keeps us awake at night. We come to see ourselves as agents to make wrongs right.”⁵ Slowly, the way we do life is altered.

LOVING: to love kindness (*hesed*)

I’m not a biblical language scholar by any stretch, but I studied just enough to be thankful for those who are. The word used here, *hesed*, is a rich one. “When used of human

³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 192

⁴ Sherman, p. 179

⁵ Sherman, pp. 179-180

relationships it means love with a strong element of loyalty, such as that between a husband and wife or between two friends. When used of the human relationship to God, it again means love-loyalty.”

One writer says this word *hesed* “might be called covenant-love.” So it’s a term of relationship that is being held against the practice of ritual sacrifice. God wants this love of kindness rather than the hollow activities people are practicing. *Hesed* is a key word in the book of Hosea in which “the people believe that they can fulfill their obligations toward [God] through ‘religion’ which consists of sacrifices and burnt offerings,” while “what the Lord really wants is their love and their loyalty.”⁶ Slowly, our loyalties and passions will be changed.

WALKING: to walk humbly with your God

“The word translated ‘humbly’ has more the sense of ‘circumspectly, carefully,’ than humility.” (NEB reads “wisely”) And the mandate to walk has to do with “the whole orientation of one’s life.” I learned from an Old Testament professor that “In Judaism the word for ethics is *halacha* which means “walking”; the idea is that the task of ethics is to describe how one ought to walk one’s day-by-day life.”⁷ Slowly, we fall into a rhythm of walking with God.

The request of the rabbi to his disciples, then (which we hear from Jesus to his disciples), is “not ‘believe’ but rather ‘walk’ or ‘follow me.’” This is another place where we sometimes get hung up and think we’ve checked that one off of our list. I believe in Jesus, CHECK. I have been baptized as a Christ-follower, CHECK. And now I’m done, WRONG. Now we’re walkin’!

How should I respond to God? What does God want from me? “The answer given here describes a step-by-step living with God and living for others, acting as advocate for the powerless and showing care for those who are hurting and who need help.”

Micah sees a couple of things going on. He is witnessing the now misguided and empty practice of burnt offerings that is void of the essential life transformation God really wants of God’s people. Micah also sees the discrepancy between those who can easily afford to sacrifice more favorable animals and those who cannot. The worship practice itself has become one where injustice limits people’s access to God.

Fast-forward to Jesus’ time of preaching and teaching, and there are still plenty of people left beyond the temple’s walls and even at the literal edges of community life. If we want to consider what Doing, Loving, and Walking looks like...then let’s look to Jesus. One element of *doing justice* is mercy—active compassion. “The Greek word from which compassion is derived [not gonna pronounce it: *splagchinizomai*] means literally ‘from the

⁶ Limburg, James. *Interpretation: Hosea-Micah*, p. 29.

⁷ Limburg, p. 193

bowels,' denoting the visceral reaction to someone or something. Mercy, therefore, is both feeling compassion and acting upon it."⁸

If you've read or heard much from the Gospels, I hope you have picked up on the theme of mercy as lived out by Jesus. When it came to the marginalized, Jesus was frequently found healing and blessing the lame, the blind, the demon possessed, the outcast. Seen by many within religious leadership and dominant culture as inferior and excluded, Jesus is in their midst not just working but eating, praying, living. He's walkin' with 'em!

So if Micah's teaching is not concrete enough for us, then we need to look at Jesus. What did he spend his time DOING, how do we see him LOVING, and how can we WALK like him, follow him? I think it was Logan who said in a meeting last week, "Follow Christ. Walk where he is. Keep in step with him."

One time Jesus was sharing a Sabbath meal with a top religious leader. You can find this story in Luke 14. At the dinner he turned to the host and said, "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

15That triggered a response from one of the guests: "How fortunate the one who gets to eat dinner in God's kingdom!"

16-17Jesus followed up. "Yes. For there was once a man who threw a great dinner party and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests, saying, 'Come on in; the food's on the table.'

18"Then they all began to beg off, one after another making excuses. The first said, 'I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.'

19"Another said, 'I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.'

20"And yet another said, 'I just got married and need to get home to my wife.'

21"The servant went back and told the master what had happened. He was outraged and told the servant, 'Quickly, get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and wretched you can lay your hands on, and bring them here.'

22"The servant reported back, 'Master, I did what you commanded— and there's still room.'

23-24"The master said, 'Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full! Let me tell you, not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party.'"

⁸ DBI, p. 547

Is Jesus being cruel here when his story ends with, “not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party”? Or does he understand that so many of us are busy filling out our check-lists we aren’t stopping for the party. Are we successful enough that we aren’t really in need of much help from God?

What is Jesus’ idea of a party? Rich and poor together. Religious leader and misfits. The homeless, the hungry, the wanderer on the country road. That’s a party!

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?

We learn how to walk by watching Jesus. We follow him, we watch where he’s going, and we keep in step with him. And that can be really hard to do because there are so many forces in our lives showing us what they think is good. There are so many forces in our lives that want to show us the way to walk.

Many of my childhood summer days were spent at the country club. (And it was THE country club, not A country club.) I have lovely, wonderful memories of family meals and days spent with friends and family at the pool drinking frozen pink lemonade. But as an adult, I have found that I cannot reconcile the ways of the kingdom and the ways of the country club. People try it all the time, **but you cannot do both** with all your heart and mind and soul. The values and standards and economy of God’s kingdom are almost always in direct opposition to the values and standards and economy of the country club.

We have to decide as individual believers which way will form our identity. We also have to decide as a community of believers which way will form the Church at Northminster. Will we be an exclusive community where everyone looks alike, shares common social tastes, and we can bask in the pleasant breeze of our loveliness as the frozen pink lemonades come by? That is attractive and enjoyable and safe, and there are plenty of places in town that function in that way.

Or...will we be a community that throws the doors open and ushers in the very kingdom of God? And God help us if we dare to choose this way, because you and I will never be the same again. That sounds terrifying, and it really should be. God help us, because the country club will never look the same again to us, either. In this kingdom community, we gather together on equal ground—rich and poor, black and white, high-powered attorney and unemployed wanderer. Like I said earlier, when we open ourselves up to this way of living, this faith practice of seeking justice, “We see wrong we have never noticed” before.⁹ WE-WILL-BE-CHANGED-FOREVER.

Let’s consider this matter of choice, too. We can become aware of the forces that are most influential in our formation (is it the country club or is the kingdom), and we can

⁹ Sherman, p. 179

make changes and choices accordingly. But when it comes to this place, when it comes to how we will move forward as a community, I believe with everything in me that God has made that choice for us. God is choosing for us to be an upside-down, kingdom community. The choices now have to do with our response—individual and corporate.

We could spend months on this dimension of God's activity in our midst, but I only have three more weeks. (Some of you might think that's three weeks too many of all this peace and justice stuff! Keep coming back, let's talk about it, let's wrestle with it. I'll attempt to get some info up on Northminster's web site and activate the comments section on the blog, too. Then this really can be a conversation.)

In those three weeks, here's where we're heading: Next Week is *An Anointed Life*—what does it mean to be anointed, officially tapped and blessed by God, to live this "other" life and "other" way? We'll take a look at some of the practices and opportunities mentioned on your resource sheet, too. (Don't forget that we're in the sanctuary next week for a combined service.)

Then in two weeks I'll be joined by the lovely and talented Beth McMahon for *A Green Life*. We just want to get in on the green trend. But really, Beth and I are looking at this developing theme of God's activity in the world, our calling to participate at the margins of society, and we are going to attempt to connect these upside-down, kingdom standards to the physical world around us. God wants us to relate to each other, particularly to the strangers among us, in a particular way. How does God want us to relate to the physical creation? Then the final week, *A Full Life*, attempts to wrap it all up as we consider what it means to love others as we love ourselves.

I hope you'll take part in the online study and discussion. You have a resource handout with books, scripture, podcasts, and more. This is for anyone who wants to dig deeper, ask some questions, think through these concepts. Also, these sermons will be available on Northminster's web site each week and then on CD by next Sunday. Take it to your small group, take it to the coffee shop with some friends, and let's really get a conversation going around here about who God is calling us to be in this community in Richmond's northside.

We stand between Ginter Park, Highland Park, and Battery Park. Some of us live in this neighborhood, some of us drive in from far away. Why is God bringing us together? Who is God shaping us to be? What could happen on the corner of Moss Side and Westwood Avenues if we take God seriously and stand together to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk wisely with our God?

I'll close with this. The Iona Community, on the West Coast of Scotland, is a Christian community committed to the "ordinary places of life and work, in prayer, economic

sharing, meeting together and working towards justice and peace.”¹⁰ Each day there is a theme for prayer, study, and reflection, and I’d like to close us today with a prayer from Monday’s emphasis, “Justice and Peace.”

O Christ of the poor and the yearning
Kindle in our hearts within
A flame of love for our neighbor,
For our foe, for our friend,
 for our kindred all.
From the humblest thing that lives
To the name that is highest of all
Kindle in my heart within
A flame of love.

Amen.

¹⁰ Newell, J. Philip. *Celtic Prayers from Iona*. Paulist Press, New York, 1997.