

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Imagine, if you will, a courtroom. Varnished wood paneling. A witness stand. An impressive, even intimidating judge's bench high on its dais facing the tables where the plaintiff, the defendant, and their lawyers are seated, and behind them, the on-lookers. "All rise," cries the bailiff, as a procession of judges enters the courtroom and takes their seats at the bench. With a rustling of paper and creaking of seats, everyone else in the courtroom settles in, and the legal proceedings begin.

This is the context of our Old Testament reading today, but with a difference. The prophet Micah, who was active during the eighth century before Christ, describes a heavenly courtroom scene in which a divine lawsuit is being heard. The judges are the world's mountains, the hills, and the very foundations of the earth. The defendants are the people of ancient Israel. The attorney for the plaintiff is Micah himself. And the plaintiff? God. Yes, God.

And why the lawsuit? What is God's complaint against God's people? In a nutshell: that the people's religious practices have become divorced from their ethical actions. They "talk the talk" in worship while failing to "walk the walk" outside of it. But God desires more than empty words.

Let's listen in on what's happening in the courtroom. Attorney Micah rises and stands before the judges' bench. "Your Honors," he says, "The Lord has a controversy with his people. I call the Lord to the witness stand." And there, on the witness stand, the Lord speaks. In a voice of frustration combined with heartfelt and poignant bewilderment, God says: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Please answer me! Remember?! I love you, and I always have loved you! I brought you out of slavery in Egypt and led you safely away from Pharaoh and his armies who sought to destroy you. I gave you leaders--Moses, Aaron, and Miriam--who gave you my law and guided you through the wilderness to the edge of the land I promised you. Remember?! You were at the River Jordan about to cross over to the Promised Land, when Balak the Moabite king instructed the seer Balaam to curse you, but Balaam listened to my voice, and risking the king's displeasure blessed you instead, not once but four times! Remember?! And finally, I gave you Joshua, who led you safely across the Jordan from Shittim to Gilgal into the promised land. Remember?! I have saved you. I have been faithful to you. But you seem to have forgotten all my gracious deeds. And in forgetting me, you have abandoned your relationship with me."

God finishes speaking, his anguished voice echoing through the chamber. He relinquishes the witness stand, and taking his place is the defendant, ancient Israel. A bit supercilious, a bit smug, a bit sarcastic, and missing God's point entirely, Israel says: "Well, Lord, what exactly do you want? I can offer you sacrifices of young calves. Or, how about thousands of rams, and tens of thousands rivers of oil? Heck, do you want me to give you my firstborn child, too?"

Israel returns to his seat, and after conferring with the Lord, and with the permission of the judges, attorney Micah addresses the defense: "Well, Israel, your emphasis on sacrifices is precisely the issue. God doesn't care about empty ritual, and you know it. God never has. God has told you over and over again what is good, and what God requires: Which is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

"Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." This is sometimes referred to as the "golden text" of the Old Testament. What does that mean for God's people? What did it mean for the people of ancient Israel? And what does it mean for us here today?

The Bible makes it quite clear: Doing justice is measured by how well the most vulnerable fare in a community. It balances personal good with the full flourishing of the common good. It nurtures relationships among all people and ensures the equitable distribution of goods, benefits, and burdens of a community. Loving kindness, the Bible tells us, involves affection, compassion, and the ethical love of neighbor, exhibiting the same kind of loyal love to another person, and indeed, all creation, that God exhibits toward us. And walking humbly with God underpins both of these. It includes reverence, openness, personal integrity, honesty, and truthfulness.

Today as you know is the occasion of St. Luke's Annual Meeting. At the meeting later this morning you will hear from our ministry leaders and receive the Annual Report, in which you will be able to read about St. Luke's many ministries. "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." A number of our ministries reflect this "golden text" of Micah's in tangible, hands-on ways: the Grace Pantry, the Lunchbox, Open Doors, Outreach. Other ministries--like the Monday book group, the Wednesday group, Bible studies, Ladies' Guild and Men's lunch group, Finance and Stewardship, Altar Guild--provide the spiritual and financial support for these hands-on ministries. They

also empower individual parishioners to go out into the world to embody this golden text. For what Micah stresses is that ritual worship is not enough; ethical actions must be part of it. In the New Testament, we are told in no uncertain terms in the letter of James that, while good works alone won't save us, faith without good works is a dead faith. When Jesus calls us to love our neighbor, the word "love" is an action verb. God calls us to do justice as part of our worship experience, and to do worship with our acts of justice as part of the liturgy.

While St. Luke's does much, however, I wonder whether we could be doing more to live out Micah's "golden text"--in other words, to be as concerned with those outside our doors as those within--to make ourselves visible in the world as church, as people of faith who care about the people Jesus cared about. One way we did that in 2016 was to host a discussion series on race, as part of the Trinity Institute webcast last winter. It was a great opportunity to provide space for those difficult discussions. The discussions were hugely enriched by the participation of students, including students of color, from North Country Community College. Similarly, on Inauguration Day prior to our service of prayer and meditation, we hosted an informal gathering over coffee for people to talk about their hopes and fears about the new administration in Washington. That gathering was well attended by both parishioners and people from the wider community, as was the prayer service itself. I think there is potential for St. Luke's to host more of these gatherings to enable people in and outside our church to discuss the difficult issues facing us, whether it be race, medical care, gun violence, the social safety net, education, or any other values associated with the justice of the kingdom of God.

Because of the actions taken last week by the new administration in Washington D.C., on my mind and heart right now is the plight of refugees and immigrants. The demonizing and dehumanizing of anyone on the basis of race, religion, or nationality, and the refusal of entry to those who are among the most threatened and dispossessed on our planet, is horrifying and utterly antithetical to the Bible's consistent teaching of welcoming the stranger and protecting the vulnerable. Faith organizations and leaders have spoken out against the executive actions on immigration and refugees. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has said that refugee resettlement work "is God's work, and we show the face of God through the care and compassion in that work."

I believe that we at St. Luke's, as people of faith, need to do what many parishes and dioceses in the Episcopal Church are doing: to commit to protect and defend the human dignity of immigrants, refugees, and those who fear deportation; to stand and work with those whose race or religion is threatened by the vitriolic and violent language and action in American society; to confront bigotry, fear, ignorance and hatred whenever and wherever we encounter it; and to protect the physical, psychological, and spiritual safety of women, people of sexual and gender diversity, the elderly and the physically impaired, and all others who find themselves particularly vulnerable in our nation at this time.¹ Such a commitment is not partisan politics but rather reflects our Baptismal Covenant and is scripturally based in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus' commandment that we love our neighbors as ourselves does, after all, echo the commandment in Leviticus, which declares, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself." (Lev 19:34)

The national Episcopal Church has resources that can inform and assist us, such as the Episcopal Public Policy Network; Episcopal Migration Ministries; Episcopal Peace Fellowship; and Episcopal Social Justice and Advocacy Engagement. All you have to do is go on the Episcopal Church website to find a wealth of resources.

So today, I invite you to spend some time praying, thinking, and talking with one another about what St. Luke's should be doing as a parish to live out the prophet Micah's golden text: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

¹ I am indebted to the 2016 Election Statement posted by the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon on their website.