

Doing Justice

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
July 9, 2017
Text: Micah 6:6-8

Justice and what it means to do justice, to live justice as people of faith, was a key focus of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ which just concluded this past Tuesday, July 4th in Baltimore, MD. What are called “justice and witness” ministries have always been foundational to the United Church of Christ denomination, and its fore-runner denominations. Historically, our Congregationalist ancestors were always on the cutting edge of issues of justice. For example, did you know that the Old South Meeting House in Boston, one of the oldest still worshipping congregations in the country, was the place where the organizers of the Boston Tea Party met to plan this first act of civil disobedience in the New World? That happened in 1773. Prior to that in 1700 Congregationalist pastor, the Reverend Samuel Sewall, wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet ever published in the Americas. In 1785 our Congregational forebears ordained the first African-American to the ministry, the Rev. Lemuel Haynes and the first female ordained to the ministry, the Rev. Antoinette Brown, was ordained in 1853.

That commitment to cutting edge practices of justice continued after the formation of the United Church of Christ

denomination in 1957. The first openly gay man was ordained to ministry in 1972, the Rev. William R. Johnson, and the first African-American to be elected to a leadership role in a mainline denomination was the Rev. Joseph H. Evans, elected President of the UCC in 1976. These are but a few of the “UCC Firsts,” many of which were grounded in the UCC’s commitment to justice for all of God’s Beloved community. The centrality of justice to who we understand ourselves to be theologically is apparent in the UCC Statement of faith, which you can find affixed to the inside front page of the hymnal in your pew. The last stanza reads, “You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing and eternal life in your realm which has no end.” I especially love this phraseology because it makes clear the interconnectedness between sin, grace, trial and rejoicing and the struggle for justice and peace. The living of justice, the pursuit of justice, is not easy, dear friends. We in the United Church of Christ know this well. And yet still we pursue it. Still we persist in our efforts and our commitment. But, what does that really mean to you and me in this, our beloved church?

Understanding a little more about Micah, whose familiar words we read just a few moments, will be helpful to our ponderings on justice this morning. Micah is considered one of the minor prophets but that is only due to the length of his

writings, and not the significance of his words or his status within the list of prophets, major and minor. Micah was a younger contemporary of Isaiah and he, along with the other prophets active at the same time, were trying to warn the leadership of Judah and Israel that their eventual collapse and defeat by their enemies was inevitable due to their sinful, selfish ways. Micah in today's terms would be a populist whose core message was the condemnation of the corruption of the ruling elite of Israel and Judah, including the religious leadership of the Temple. Biblical scholar Daniel Smith-Christopher describes Micah as strongly condemning the corrupt exploitation of the peasant farmers by the Israelite elite through over-taxation and forced conscription into the army. Both of these actions, over-taxation and forced conscription, only benefited the ruling elite economically and politically. This, Micah said in no uncertain terms, was sin. Grievous sin, in fact.

This is why the 6th chapter of Micah a portion of which we read this morning is actually presented as a sort of divine lawsuit. Scholar Gregory Mobley describes it as an indictment of Israel's guilt before God in legal terms even as it reaffirms God's commitment to mercy on an infinite scale. "With what shall I come before the Lord?" Micah asks. "With burnt offerings, with calves a year old?" he continues, referencing the various types of offerings which could be made in the Temple, with the assistance

of significant money expended and the good graces of the Temple priests. But instead Micah provides a different answer: “God 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?”

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah’s words ring as loudly and prophetically today as they did when he first uttered them at the end of the 8th century BCE. He reminds us powerfully that God doesn’t care about fancy worship and extravagant offerings and piety which is only skin-deep. God, Micah says in no uncertain terms, God does not care about what you say you believe or what you do in worship if the way you act in your everyday life does not reflect God’s presence in your life. Do you treat others fairly, all the time and not just when someone else is watching? Is kindness something that radiates from you to everyone and everything because it is so central to who you are? Is God your companion every day, even though you know you can never be worthy of God’s boundless love for you? If you can’t answer yes to these questions, Micah says, then it doesn’t matter how good, how wonderful a person you *think* you are, God will be disappointed in you. If you are unwilling to do what you need to do to be able to answer yes to these questions, then you have no business considering yourself a faithful person. You are, Micah

says, either all the way in on justice, kindness and faithful humility, or you are all the way out. No wishy-washy middle ground for Micah. You are just, or you aren't. You are kind, or you aren't. You walk humbly with God, or you stumble along by yourself, kidding yourself into believing everything is okay.

Wow. That's harsh, we think. Yes, it is. But that's Micah for you. And most of the Old Testament prophets for that matter. But, how is this helpful to us? How is this all or nothing approach to doing justice even possible for us? We are surrounded by injustice all day every day, some of which we see and most of which we don't because it doesn't touch our lives directly. Or so we think. The truth, and this is a big part of what I think Micah was trying to get at in his brutally honest way, is that injustice for some ultimately results in injustice for all. Put another way, if someone acts unjustly and gets away with it, anyone can expect to do the same. And somebody is going to do the same thing to someone else. That's just human nature. If someone is treated unfairly and the perpetrator gets away with it, someone else is sure to try the exact same thing. We know this. We've experienced this. And we know we don't like it. After all, no one wants to be treated unfairly. We all want an equal chance for success, an equal opportunity for happiness, a fair shot at a good life. Who doesn't? But too often life isn't like that. It wasn't for the people of Micah's time almost 3000 years ago and it's not for

people still today. And, here's the scary part, God expects us to do something about it.

Yep, that's Micah's point. Injustice is real. Unkindness is rampant. People have forgotten what humility in the face of the Almighty should be. And Micah expects us, you and me, to do something about it. But what? How? Those are the questions we face and we face them all the time. Injustice is everywhere. Children dying of treatable diseases or drowning trying to escape a war that overran their homes. Hard-working, tax-paying people rounded up and deported, ripping families apart and destroying successful businesses, because of paperwork technicalities. Elderly people forced into homelessness because their meager incomes won't qualify them for public housing, or because their medications cost more than their rent. Lethal pesticides being allowed into our food supplies because they are more cost effective than other options. Dear friends, all of these are examples of injustice we live with every day. But what can we do? Really, what can we do? That is a legitimate question to which there are no easy answers.

But I do know this. The journey towards justice begins with tiny steps that anyone can make. For one thing, "random acts of kindness" as they are sometimes called can go a long way to making justice and kindness visible in a world too often harsh and unforgiving. What might be a random act of kindness? Well one

that's gotten popular is that when you go to the drive-through at your favorite coffee emporium, like Dunkin Donuts for example, is to pay for your own order and the person's behind you. That's happened to me a few times, and it is awesome! It put a smile on my face for the whole day. Especially because I then paid for the person behind me.

And there are all sorts of opportunities for these acts of kindness, which embody justice, every day. You can leave cold bottles of water on these hot days for the guys who pick up your trash. If you take your trash to the dump, then how about leaving a cold drink for the postal worker who visits your house every day? How about making the extra effort to let people pull ahead of you in traffic or even, gasp, give them the parking spot you've had your eye on in the shopping center parking lot? How about taking the time to drop a note to someone you haven't seen in a while or calling up a sibling or an old friend who's probably missing you too? How about holding the door open for the elderly gentleman struggling with it, or the harried mom entering the store behind you, cranky kids in tow? How about listening, really listening to someone trying to tell you about a difficult situation they have had to endure? Not to give advice, not to tell them they are right or wrong in what they did or didn't do. Just listening so that this person feels heard, feels like somebody cares.

Another very important action we can all take is to be in touch with our elected representatives to speak out against injustice. Pick up that phone and call about those things that just seem wrong to you. Tell them that justice for all matters to you. And if this seems too difficult, take a moment in prayer before you pick up the phone and invite Jesus to have the conversation for you. You'll be surprised at how well this works!

Dear friends, all of these seemingly small things put our feet firmly on the path Micah would have us walk in our relationship with God. All of these things help us to glimpse a more just, kinder world for the people we interact with, and for ourselves. These seemingly small actions enable us to experience our own answers to Micah's timeless question, "with what shall I come before the Lord?" Micah tell us what we already know is the answer to this question. We come before the Lord with all that we are, with all that we have, and with all that we have done and will do. Really then, the question becomes, will God like what He finds in us, what He sees us doing with the lives He gifted to us? That, I think, is truly up to us. Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God. Never easy but always possible. Never simple but always worth trying. Don't you think? Amen.