

“Jesus and Judge Judy”
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12
Sermon 4/29/18

Judge Judy drives me crazy. I admit I have not watched her show very often, but then again, there are very few shows that I watch very often. What I have noticed is how easy it is to predict the verdict, simply by the look on her face. She belittles the litigants, reflects an easily stirred temper, she interrupts, she yells, and, at least to my mind, appears smug and arrogant. Hers is the last courtroom in which I’d wish to be in. At least that was my thought until a few days ago. I was rereading the passage from Micah that Mike read this morning. Over the years I have read this passage many different times. It has always spoken to me in a challenging way. But for some unexplained reason the image in Micah of a courtroom registered very differently for me this time. It is, by the way, a very disturbing image.

It is Micah’s depiction of a courtroom in heaven. It is a place of ultimate judgement.

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and will contend with Israel.

The court is in session. The reason has been stated. The one bringing suit has been named. The jury has been determined. God has a controversy with his people. God is pressing for an explanation. The people have been called before the judge and the jury and must explain their behavior. All of creation, the mountains and the hills, the enduring foundation of the earth, will sit in judgement.

An awesome moment is at hand. The people must offer a defense. The question they must answer is: How have they come to believe that respectability and religiosity are more important than loving God enough to seek justice for everyone, to be peacemakers, to be kind and loving? They are called to explain how they have come to believe that God cares more about their houses of worship, their styles of liturgy, their hymns and prayer than God cares for how we treat each other in every one of our relationships? They are being pressed to explain how they have come to believe that forms and rituals matter more than substance?

It is an awesome, and fearsome moment. God is prepared to judge them. The charge is both sad and terrifying. It is wrought with anger and with apprehension. It is saturated with God’s despair and a sense of God’s righteousness.

O my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.

No one in the courtroom knows what to say. The charges are valid. Pretending otherwise would be foolish. Someone has to answer. But who? Hesitantly, quietly, the reply is offered. The people plead ignorance. God knows better. The people suggest they are doing the best they know how to do. Again, God, the judge, knows better.

Quietly, so much so, perhaps the judge has to ask them to speak louder and clearer, they begin.

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 ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the first fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Clearly, all creation hears the attempt at defense. Everyone knows it is a weak effort to evade the truth. The judgement will be made against the people. Pretense is no longer possible. God has already given sufficient direction, but the people went on their merry old way. Whatever the judgement, no matter how severe, it will be merited. The people will be found guilty and will be called out for it. For the record, God will again give the instruction that has been consistently ignored.

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.

The judgement is implied. No one needs it spelled out for her or him. The choice between further judgement and finding a place before God is theirs to make.

And so it has always been. The world, all of creation, has a set of rules, if you will and are consequences for every action. Respectability, religious piety, hymns and prayers are not enough. There is no substitute for being kind and loving, no substitute for walking humbly with God.

We don't have to take this episode from Micah literally to get the message, do we? Jesus knew this story, steeped in Judaism he was. His life style, his teachings reflect his awareness of it. For the lifestyle and his teaching reflect the message of the prophets of Israel. It was this teaching and lifestyle that Jesus was proposing in Matthew's telling.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

And if you recall the setting of these teachings, those hearing them did not get it.

When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked, and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

They were so busy satisfying their own individual spiritual needs that they had missed the point. They were so busy praying the prescribed prayers, reading the right scripture, that they missed the message. Living as a child of God in word and deed is more important than looking like a child of God. Like in Micah's time the judgement is clear.

Truly I tell you just as you did it to of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me...'

No matter how we deal with eternal damnation, whether we hear it literally (which I do not) or figuratively (which I do), following God, following Jesus, is about living as he lived, loving as he loved, more than it is about religious practice.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for
theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

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

.....

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?

*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.*

Hear Ye! Hear Ye! The court is now in session.