

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

It was the week of the polar vortex and what else were we to do with seven days indoors? Why, we renovated our bathroom, of course. It was the only room of the house left untouched, unrenovated, by the previous owners. It had paisley flowered wallpaper, generic Styrofoam ceiling tiles, and lighting that did nothing to aid one in getting ready for the day. The room simply did not match the character of the rest of our log cabin-esque home.

Among many, there was one simple change that even our 22-month-old son LOVES. We changed the direction of the mirror. It's somewhat of an oval-shaped mirror which had been hanging horizontally and now hangs vertically. Since the renovation I have on numerous occasions found our son standing on his stool making faces in the mirror. He can SEE now. And he's looking at himself in brand new light...and while cracking us up he is practicing his God-implanted gifts in the process. Thailer is made to be an entertainer; we've been certain of this from the time he was just four months old playing peek-a-boo with us. But that's another matter entirely.

This week's texts have that same kind of mirroring effect to them—at least they have for me. When Judy asked me to preach for Freedom Sunday, and gave me freedom to choose which week of lectionary texts I preferred, I skimmed through about four months' worth of passages. When I first saw the Micah 6 passage I thought, "No." It's a text that is often overused in the social justice conversation, and I simply wanted to avoid it. But, as you know, here I stand with Micah 6 as one of the texts for us to delve into.

When I read the four passages together in true preparation for this moment, many things perfectly blended together for me. I saw the exact point I would make to you and how I could weave The Set Free Movement to the top of the conversation. Then I kept reading and studying and praying, suddenly feeling inadequate to deliver a message to the people of St. Paul's and wondering how would I ever communicate the thread that pulls these four passages together—because I no longer saw God's message but my own. A third reading and more inductive look at the text revealed a mirror.

The psalmist's opening question: what may dwell in your tent, O Lord? Who in your holy hill? And Micah's vehement messages of doom to a disobedient and culturally indulgent Israel draws near conclusion with the assertion, "He has told you, O Mortal, what is good." What follows is a summary of the whole Israelite law, if your ear is keen enough to perceive it. Then we hear Jesus' teaching in Matthew on whom the blessed inheritors of the kingdom are. What are we to do but hold these texts up like a mirror? After all...do we not WANT to sit on God's holy hill with him? Do we not WANT to know what God says is good? Do we not WANT to inherit the kingdom?

How many of us have or are asking the question of what God's will for our individual lives is? Aren't we asking each other how to make it through life's daily trials of meetings and health and assignments and relationships? Today's texts won't reveal to us a prosperity recipe, but rather one of living out holiness and righteousness in the Lord's eyes. With these texts we'll stand at

the mirror; we'll make faces at it which will reveal to us the practices which allow us to receive God's implanted gifts to us.

The psalmist shows us the way of the blameless, affirming at the end that we shall never be moved if we do these things. Firm and planted with him. There's a theme in these words that urges us to stand in right relationship with God in regards to how we treat our neighbors; here's the list that we ought to see reflected in the mirror: Walk blamelessly—Do what is right—Speak truth—Do not slander—Do no evil—Do not take reproach against the neighbor—Eyes despise the wicked—Honor those who fear the Lord, who stand by their word even when hurt—Do not charge interest—Do not take bribes against the innocent.

This list is pretty simple and accomplishable, right? Take a week, a day, or an hour to examine, to look in the mirror. It won't take long, listening to our thoughts or our phone conversations, or seeing the products in our cupboards, to realize that standing in the mirror is one who only faintly resembles the self that God intends. Let us individually and corporately strive to be Psalm 15 people.

Now, looking at Micah 6, this is certainly a mirror held up to Israel's face. This gives us a picture of what a community in right relationship to God looks like. God bellows to the mountains his astonishment at Israel's forgetfulness. And in the end the people are still saying, "Let's go to worship, let's sing and pray, and sacrifice our first fruits," (sounds a little like what we're doing here today, doesn't it?) as if they or we think that will satisfy God. I love the contrast of the people's response in 6:6 and the prophet's vehement ending in 6:8. It'd be easy to think they're similar; to bow and to be humble are so close in posture. The contrast lies in their context. Micah calls Israel out...the community bowing before God is not what He wants, but instead to be walked with—a nuance harkening the hearer back to the Garden. He has told you, O Mortal, what is good...all that's required is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. There's a sweetness to this for us to grasp, in that what is good begins with justice.

Ken Wytsma, in his book Pursuing Justice, states, "*Justice corresponds to what ought to be,*" and, "*We are never closer to God than when we pursue justice by serving others.*" Leading with justice gives us the precise action steps to holiness. To be in right relationship with God and others is "...to do what ought to be—to love those who require everything and yet seem to give nothing in return." When we are embracing the entire lens of biblical justice (which is hard in our day, when the word justice has been muddled, abused, and repurposed) we are simply doing what ought to be.

When you stand at the mirror of these texts, it could be easy to think the picture blurry or the lights too dim to see a clear reflection. I found myself looking at a dim community mirror a few years ago even while I was in the midst of fruitful ministry. I was looking for justice doers and opportunities to join in when I met Kevin Austin, currently director of The Set Free Movement. He spoke practically and simply about how to end slavery. Who else was our neighbor or the stranger in our midst, who else deserved to be loved even when it took everything and they could never give anything in return? It made so much sense to me to do justice and to love kindness by ending slavery. I jumped at the chance, and I think you should too. And believe me, it is a humbling walk.

The Set Free Movement rallies around doing justice and seeks to establish or transform communities who together do what ought to be done. Set Free wants to see individuals and communities stand in right relationship with God and our neighbors. With an emphasis on ending modern slavery, or human trafficking, as you may know it, we believe that each person is deserving of dignity and being on the receiving end of a Psalm 15 person's righteous living. With 27 million slaves in the world today, there are a lot of people wondering if there is any kindness left. There are a lot of people waiting to encounter truth tellers and peacemakers. There are so many pleading for mercy. We get asked often why we are doing this in Bond County and my answer is always that slavery touches each and every one of our lives every day. It does take some learning and adjusting of some of our lenses, but slavery is here. We have opportunity to put ourselves in right relationship to those slaves and to our God by doing what ought to be done.

A modern slave is someone who is forced to, or tricked into, doing something they don't want to do—either some kind of labor service or commercial sex trade. Let me give a few examples that touch us locally.

Eighty percent of the world's chocolate comes out of the Ivory Coast in Africa, where children are forced to harvest the cocoa beans. We have power as consumers to make this right by purchasing fair trade products and telling the eighty percent of chocolate producers why we won't purchase their chocolate. Products in your home like chocolate, coffee, clothing, and toys come from industries with known slave labor practices. We must do what ought to be and clean up the supply chain of our homes, our businesses, our churches, our community etc. I know Valentine's Day is coming, I'm sorry to bring this news, but the freedom and dignity of a person should matter as we express sentiments of love to others.

About a year ago the Bond County Set Free Task force held a twelve-hour prayer event; a woman who stopped by told us that children do disappear from THIS community. The reality is that one out of every three kids who hits the street has 48 hours before they are approached by a trafficker and is forcibly whisked into the commercial sex industry. The FBI has been finding missing and exploited kids on backpage.com, where they are bought and sold and used like a Craigslist posting. With Love's Truck Stop just two miles from here, it's REALLY easy for our vulnerable kids, or kids who get in a fight with mom or dad, to hit the road. We must do what ought to be, and invest in the lives of our young people through education and supervision and justice-doing, to bring about restored communities.

Last June the Task Force was presented with a vision of opening a Safe House in this area. Our boots trembled and our hearts leapt at the possibility of welcoming rescued trafficking survivors to this community to find freedom, healing and to be offered the chance to THRIVE. A short nine months later we are so close this being a reality. So many things have fallen into place even without our asking. In October we were approached by a couple planning to retire in Greenville in 7-10 years; they asked if our program would like to reside in their home until then. They plan to close on a five-acre property later this month. The property they chose will allow us to walk out the fullness of our vision. This community has a unique opportunity to help welcome the stranger, to be agents of hope and healing, to set the captives free, and to do justice in the lives of the women who will come.

The Set Free Movement champions holistic freedom and seeks to create new futures for survivors and those vulnerable to modern slavery. For us championing means we celebrate the phenomenal work of organizations like The Simple Room and TeenMOPS, who are doing justice. We will do what we can to support and come alongside them.

A holistic approach and creating new futures means we proclaim Christ and focus our efforts in four main areas: 1) Raising awareness, 2) Prevention efforts, 3) Rescuing survivors and 4) Restoring lives. We have big dreams and initiatives in these four areas and currently do not have the resources or personnel to accomplish them.

Recently we've been talking about finding the gaps in our community where these four areas are incomplete: who doesn't know about injustice in the community/world? Where are we missing services? Are there pockets of vulnerable people that aren't being reached? Let's reach them. How can we mend or shift broken systems and families?

There's talk of collaborating with all the justice-doing organizations in order to identify and fill those gaps. A unique response comes from key people each time we bring up this idea. We keep hearing that THIS is the perfect time for something like this and that the community is ready. How close are we to a Psalm 15, Micah 6, Matthew 5 community? And what does the reflection in the mirror of Greenville, IL, look like? What roles will you play in changing the direction of the mirror and allowing Greenville to live into what God intends for us?

Wytmsa remarks, "*Justice is rooted in the character of God, established in the creation of God, mandated by the commands of God, present in the kingdom of God, motivated by the love of God, affirmed in the teaching of Jesus, reflected in the example of Jesus, and carried on today by all who are moved and led by the Holy Spirit.*" Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God is not one directive for some of us to fulfill. It is not just part of the whole body, say a finger or hip; but rather it is more like the blood or even the breath giving color and life and vibrancy to the image in the mirror.

His Kingdom Come, His Will be done.