

WALK, PRAY, LOVE

Sermon, February 2, 2020

Text: Micah 6:1-8

Elizabeth Gilbert, in her popular book entitled *Eat, Pray, Love* (a book that was made into a movie by the same name in 2010 starring Julia Roberts ... a movie I didn't see, but I'm getting sidetracked a bit), wrote, "There are only two questions that human beings have ever fought over, all through history: (1) How much do you love me? And (2) who's in charge? Everything else is somehow manageable. But these two questions of love and control undo us all, trip us up and cause war, grief, and suffering." I think she's onto something ... so much of human conflict, whether between two people in a relationship or two conflicting nations, can be traced back to one or both of these two questions: How much do you really love me? And just who is in charge?

It's a bit of a stretch, but I would venture to say this is also true theologically ... so much of our personal and interpersonal conflict might be traced back to one or both of the following questions: How much do we love God? And just who do we think is in charge?

In the first two verses of our Old Testament reading, the prophet Micah is using the literary device of something of a divine courtroom. He ushers the people of Israel into a courtroom, where the subheading in our pew Bibles tells us, "The Lord Presents His Case Against Israel." Let's imagine Micah is ushering US into this courtroom, where we, the people of God, are told to stand before the bar. The mountains and the hills and the "foundations of the earth," all of which have, like us, been created by the hand of God, are called to be the witnesses for the prosecution. The prosecutor is God. In verses three to five, the prosecutor God builds His case against "we the people." He approaches the bench and asks, "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you, except by maybe blessing you too much? Have you forgotten how I carried you, how I brought you out of slavery, how I parted seas and rivers before you, how I gave you a home, a place among the nations, how I redeemed you from the old slaveries of your former way of life? Answer me."

In the way he's constructed this little courtroom drama, Micah isn't concerned so much that we the people have broken God's laws as he's concerned we have broken God's *heart*. We've broken His fatherly heart by failing to appreciate Him, by failing to appreciate that all we have, even life itself, is a gracious gift from His hand. From the first days after the Exodus, for that matter from the first days after creation, God's people have had a hard time remembering and appreciating that we live always and only out of His gracious hand.

In the words of Karl Barth, "All sin is rooted in a lack of gratitude." When we forget our indebtedness to God, we forget God. And when we forget God, that's when we stray from dodly ways. We sin. When we forget God, we neglect God ... and our attitude and actions begin to show it. Every time we forget we exist by the hand of God, every time we forget we have a God, we have a tendency to start acting like gods ourselves. That's when the really bad things start to happen. When mortals act like gods, when we think we are in charge, when we try to live by our own lights, by our own standards, when we do what we think is right in our own eyes and neglect God's ways, we usually wind up hurting ourselves, and we also hurt others.

As Micah continues his courtroom drama in verses six and seven, we the accused make our meager defense before the Prosecutor. We ask (V. 6) "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow down before the exalted God?" Perhaps this might be better paraphrased, "What does God want from me? What do I have to give You to take care of this? How much is this going to cost me? What will it take to make You happy, God? Shall I come to You with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression? Will that do it?"

I believe the prophet is intimating these are bad questions, corrupt questions, cynical questions. These are questions asked by people trying to bribe and bargain their way out of trouble, but still trying to stay "in charge." The main reason God hauled us into court in the first place is that we keep acting like we are the gods and that maybe God is the One looking for a hand out from us. No, this isn't about what God needs! God doesn't need anything from us; for that matter, God doesn't even need us! Rather, He *loves* us! This drama is about our need. More

precisely, it is about our need to live like men or women who know and acknowledge our need for God and go on to live our lives accordingly.

After these questions are asked, in verse 8 Micah sort of breaks into this drama he is writing ... he personally "stands up in the courtroom" and starts speaking to the accused: "*He has showed you, O man, what is good!*" The way it appears in the script looks almost poetic, but I'd rather read it as an expression of frustration, as in, "Oh, man!" In other words, "*Oh, man! Good grief! Stop asking such questions; God's already told you what He wants, and you know it! He has already told you what is good. Don't keep asking God what you are supposed to do; He's told you already! Don't keep avoiding your responsibilities, don't keep putting off responding to your calling, don't keep making excuses for things you've done or left undone with your favorite canard of being confused about what God wants you to do.*" In short, don't keep putting off doing what you know to be right and good by claiming you don't know what the will of God is for your life. I think if we are honest with ourselves we all really know in our heart of hearts what it is that God wants us to do ... we know what it is we must do to make things right, we know what it is we must do to live holier lives, we know what we have to do to maintain or practice integrity, honor and goodness, we know what it is we must do to honor and please God.

The prophet continues, "*And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*" or, as other translations have it, "*to do justice and love kindness.*" Sound simple? Don't kid yourself. First, don't confuse doing justice with believing in justice. God is not impressed with the sincerity of our *belief* in justice, or our ability to talk about justice, or our ability to lobby for justice, or our often-demonstrated ability to demand justice for ourselves and/or justify our actions. He requires us to *do* justice. DO JUSTICE - act justly, fairly, right-ly, mercifully with anyone God brings across our paths.

Second, all of us have heard or used the expression "to do justice to" something or someone. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary - "*To do justice to' is to treat or show something or someone in a way that is as good as it should be.*" For example, some critics panned the movie mentioned at the outset of the sermon by writing, "*It didn't do justice to Elizabeth Gilbert's book*" -- which means the movie didn't treat or show or portray her book as well as it should or could have.

Well, it is not until we actually try to consistently and sincerely "do justice to" all our obligations and responsibilities and loved ones, as well as loving mercy in all our dealings with others, that we begin to realize just how difficult it is. I mean, how many of us are doing justice to all the many obligations in our lives? For when will you ever "do justice" enough? When will you ever have done a good enough job? When will you ever be a good enough parent? When will you be a good enough husband or wife? Anyone here got that one all wrapped up? When will we ever have done justice enough for the poor, the sick, or the broken hearted? I say that not to get us off the hook, but to place ourselves firmly on it. It is as we sincerely try to "*do justice and love mercy,*" that we recognize our limits and shortcomings and our hand is thrust into God's hand, as we realize we need to walk with Him, talk with Him, ask for His guidance and help and strength if we are ever going to succeed at consistently acting justly and loving well.

That's what leads to the third "requirement" ... that we walk humbly with our God. If you're at all like me, you'll find as you sincerely try to consistently and faithfully fulfill the first two requirements of doing justice and loving mercy, it won't be long until you are thrust into walking humbly. You try to consistently commit yourself to always doing justice and loving mercy, trust me on this, you are going to be humbled real fast. You will realize you need help, divine help.

With apologies to Elizabeth Gilbert, we need to Walk, Pray, Love ... we need to *walk* with God, and as we do so learn to *pray* to God, if we are ever going to succeed at *loving* well. Micah has us in court because we keep forgetting that all we have is from a gracious God, and we keep forgetting we are not in charge. God never asked us to be God. He asks us to remember we *have* a God, and to keep on walking humbly with Him as we lovingly, graciously attempt to do justice and love mercy. For He has showed us what is good. Let us hold His hand ever more tightly, as day in and day out we make every effort to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.