

Series: The Minor Prophets
Today: Micah—Preparing for the Kingdom
Text: Micah 5:2- ; 6:6-8

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Unless you live in the southern hemisphere, in a place like South African, or Australia, or New Zealand, it is hard to think about Christmas when it is 90 degrees outside. So when we sang a Christmas carol on a hot Sunday morning in July, some of you may have wondered, “*What are they thinking?*” Well, we have chosen to celebrate Christmas in July to remind us that poor people are just as hungry in July as they are in November and December; the months when we tend to focus on plight of the poor and helping to address their hunger needs.

Earlier in the service we told you that food donations are down at the Council of Churches Food Bank right now. Usually, if donations are down, the Council can purchase surplus food from the Central PA Food Bank. However, reserves are low there, as well. The source of surplus food comes from grocery chains and food manufacturers like Kellogg’s, but grocery stores are being more cautious about tight margins for profit these days. This means that surplus food is just not available right now. On top of this new reality, we find that people are being more cautious about being generous as they worry about what the future holds for our economy. People may have funds enough to buy extra food or to contribute financially to agencies like the Council, but they are not quite as ready to give right now because of the uncertainty of the economy.

So those who have little or nothing suffer even more because people like you and me are concerned we won’t have enough. How appropriate that the Minor Prophet we

have chosen to study today is Micah because Micah is often called *the Prophet for the poor*.

You will recall from last week that a minor prophet is minor not because of the weight of his message but because of its length. Minor Prophets simply wrote less than the Major Prophets did. Their work is no less important to understand. It just takes less time because their writings were shorter.

Like Obadiah last week, we know very little about Micah. We know there was a prophet named *Micaiah* whose name means “*Who is like the Lord?*” It is likely that this is the same prophet for whom this book of the Bible is named, but it is not likely that he is the primary author of the entire prophecy. The historical period covered by this prophecy is just too long. So it is more likely that the prophecies of other prophets who wrote in the style of Micah were included with his writings. His prophecy spans nearly thirty years of Jewish history, but the writers who were included were addressing the same concerns.

The prophecy of Micah is placed during the time of the Assyrian invasion into Israel around 732 B.C. It continues to the final fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrians in 701 B.C. It was a time in Israel’s history when the rich became richer and the poor became poorer, and this is the theme of Micah’s message. He is concerned about the way the rich are treating the poor, and he makes promises to the poor that God sees and understands their situation; and that one day God will turn the tables on those who believe they can protect themselves from judgment with their wealth. The poor will be lifted up and the rich will be brought low.

Micah 5:2-6

The first three chapters of Micah express a continuing indictment of the people of Judah, particularly the rich and the powerful, and their lack of concern for the poor. The Prophet warns them of a conquest—the Assyrian conquest—as a punishment for their insensitivity to the will of God and their treatment of the poor.

Chapters 4 and 5 look beyond the eighth century B.C. They focus on “the latter days” when the restoration of God’s favor will occur. We are familiar with the beginning of Chapter 5. We read it during Advent or on Christmas Eve. It is the prophecy of a Messiah who will deliver the Israelites from the captivity of Assyria; one who is kind and gentle and cares for his flock as a shepherd cares for sheep. *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathath, who are one of the little clans of Judah; from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*

1100 years later, Theodotus, one of the early church fathers reflected on this passage and wrote: *The Lord of all comes as a slave amidst poverty. The hunter has no wish to startle his prey. Choosing for his birthplace an unknown village in a remote province, he is born of a poor maiden and accepts all that poverty implies, for he hopes by stealth to ensnare and save us.*

If he had been born to high rank and amidst luxury, unbelievers would have said the world had been transformed by wealth. If he had chosen as his birthplace the great city of Rome, they would have thought the transformation had been brought about by civil power. Suppose he had been the son of an emperor. They would have said: "How useful it is to be powerful!" Imagine him the son of a senator. It would have been: "Look what can be accomplished by legislation!"

But in fact, what did he do? He chose surroundings that were poor and simple, so ordinary as to be almost unnoticed, so that people would know it was the Godhead alone that had changed the world. This was his reason for choosing his mother from among the poor of a very poor country, and for becoming poor himself. (Source: Theodotus of Ancyra, a martyred saint from the 4th century)

Nearly three millennia later, we know that the promise of this ruler is Jesus, born in Bethlehem of Judea, of the house and lineage of David. We proclaim that he is the Messiah, the son of the living God, who came to take up residence with us and transform the mundane in life to something holy. We proclaim that if we want to discover his presence in our lives, one of the places we need to look is to the needs of the common people and the poor. He comes to bring peace within the hearts and minds of those who follow him, and they are the ones who are to bring peace on this earth as they establish the kingdom of God right here and right now.

Micah 6:6-8

Micah 6 returns to the situation that Israel finds itself in the present. Once again there is a condemnation on the rich for their treatment of the poor. Micah is tireless in his call for people of means to remember the people whom they would just as soon ignore, or even worse, blame. There has always been a judgment by those of us who are the wealthy of the earth on those who are poor. It is an assumption that if they would take responsibility for their own lives, they would not be poor. Micah calls the people away from their judgments and challenges them to do what is right in the sight of God while they wait for the coming of the promised Messiah. And what is it that we are to do?: *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God.*

Justice

Justice means that we level the playing field; that all people are of equal worth in the sight of God, and we must treat them this way. No one is greater because of his wealth or position or influence in society. No one is of less value because of the color of their skin or their lack of physical or mental ability.

When my daughter was just four years old, we lived in Portland, Oregon. Every year at the Lloyd Center, which was then an outdoor shopping mall, they put up a Christmas Tree which would rival the one in Rockefeller Plaza. About mid November we took Holly to the Lloyd Center. The tree was up, and the workmen were busily sawing off the lower branches which they would then, with painstaking effort, bolt back on the tree in the places that had bare spots.

When Holly saw what was going on, she asked, *“Dad, what are they doing to that tree?”* And I responded, *“They are fixing the tree so it will be perfect for Christmas.”* And Holly, as only a four year old could have possibly observed, asked me, *“Why, Dad? Did God make a mistake on that tree?”*

How do you answer a four year old? Did God make a mistake on that tree? Did God make a mistake on any tree? Do you suppose it is different when it comes to people? Are not all of us of equal value in the sight of God? Doing justice means that we fight for the rights of all people—and especially for those whom society would just as soon blame for their condition in life—the poor, the disabled, the forgotten of the world.

Kindness

Loving kindness has to do with right relationships. It is God’s call to live with compassion for others in a world filled with hatred and violence. Kindness is love

beyond limits; love which seeks reconciliation rather than retribution. It means entering into the lives of others and identifying with their needs.

I read an article recently about a new disorder which has emerged in the early part of this century. It is called *Empathy Deficit Disorder*.

Webster's Dictionary defines empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience" of someone else. With that definition in mind, psychologist Douglas LaBier, director and founder of the Center for Adult Development in Washington, DC, feels many of us are being "catastrophically unempathetic."

We suffer from what he calls Empathy Deficit Disorder (EDD). While discussing his theories with writer Amanda Robb, LaBier said "we unlearn whatever empathy skills we've picked up while coming of age in a culture that focuses on acquisition and status more than cooperation." In short, we value "'moving on' over thoughtful reflection."

Another psychologist, Dr. Frank M. Lachmann, adds that our typical responses to people's pain—lines ranging from "It could be worse" to "Let's talk about something else"—"appear to be kind and aimed at soothing," but are really nothing more than code for "Don't confront me with things that are unpleasant," or "Don't bother me with your pain."

LaBier and Lachmann agree that our narcissistic tendencies are destructive, resulting in familial destruction, like divorce, or even global destruction, like war. (source: Amanda Robb, "Empathy deficit disorder—do you suffer from it?" *O, The Oprah Magazine* (April 2008). Loving kindness is a sure antidote for EDD.

Humility

Humility means that we see ourselves for who we are with right sized thinking. It means thinking no less of ourselves nor any more of ourselves than God thinks of us. It means recognizing that no matter how gifted we may be, we did not create the gift, and humility asks that we use our gifts not just for ourselves but for all of God's children.

Yesterday morning I had the privilege of meeting with two Kenyans who live here in the United States. Gideon is the brother of Moses Sakuda and the cousin of Francis Sakuda who have spoken here at our church. His pastor is a woman named Beatrice.

They have a dream of building a multi cultural church here in Lancaster County which reaches African people who have immigrated here because of the strife in their country of origin; places like the Congo and the Sudan. As we spoke of their dream, I asked what kind of music they used in their worship. They told me that all they had was acapella singing for now, but they were praying that God would bring them some instruments.

Now I don't know of a church in the United States that didn't begin with at least a guitar or a piano or something to help people feel comfortable singing. However, this group feels called by God to do something different from whatever anyone else is doing in Lancaster. They are singing their faith acapella, and they are trusting God to bring them instruments and to build their church.

When I asked Beatrice if that was hard for her to do, she replied, "*In Kenya we have a saying: One does not climb a tree by starting at the top.*" That is true humility! It is a right sized opinion of who they are and where they feel God is calling them in

ministry. They do not pretend to be more than they are, but they do not deny the special gifts they have been given to reach those who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ as the foundation of their lives. It is a lesson in humility for all of us.

Conclusion

The message of Micah is far from being minor, even though he is a Minor Prophet. He reminds us that when God chose to identify with the human condition, he did not choose the rich and the powerful, but the poor and forgotten of the world. If we want to Discover the Heart of Christ in the Heart of this city, we would do well to look to the needs of those very people and seek to find his presence as we offer ourselves in his service. And if we need an agenda for the work we are called to do, Micah gives it to us: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Amen.