

“Peace Offerings of Justice, Mercy and Humility”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Pledge Consecration Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 11, 2018

Micah 5:2-5a; 6:6-8

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, 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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace....

“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 fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 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?

There’s a powerful community ministry in Nashville, Tennessee that I heard about some years ago. It’s called [Magdalene](#), and it is for women recovering from life on the street as prostitutes. Many of them have been addicted to one thing or another, and all of them suffer from a history of abuse. [Started by an Episcopal priest](#) and supported by local churches, Magdalene provides a safe space for these women to break free of addiction and face the traumas that haunt them. For up to two years, residents share a communal house that is their home. Lena House, as it’s called, offers the women a place with hot showers, plenty of food, real dishes and fresh linens. They each get a house key and come and go as they please, growing in trust, confidence, security and freedom. But the women who live in Lena House don’t find it an easy place, according to [one article](#) that describes their challenge, and what a woman named Carolyn has learned from it:

As with any community, often the hardest part is living with other people. Carolyn says that humbling herself to live in community is one of the most important parts of her recovery now. Conflict comes from the way that other women clean the bathroom or where they leave their things or how loud they talk. But remaining committed is crucial to her. [Carolyn says] “It would be easy to walk away now. I have a home. I got married on Valentine’s Day. I’m sober. But I’ve never finished anything in my life... “And I’ve tried doing things my way. That don’t work. You have to be humble.”

For Carolyn, living in community is a daunting challenge. Yet she knows that by sharing food, home and space with others, she gains humility and concern for those beyond herself.

We don’t live in a Nashville recovery house, but we also know the challenges of living alongside others. Who is really eager to see that one contrarian relative at the Thanksgiving table? Or how about the church, another community sometimes tested by conflict? People have overlapping ideas for what should happen in areas of ministry, not all of them are equally possible, and we can start to feel like *our* priority—or even our *presence*—has been overlooked. Family or church drama exist within the broader social conflicts among racial groups, economic classes and political orientations. Elections like this past Tuesday are one of the ways that we periodically test the tensions within our many overlapping values and communities. When we *don’t* have such mechanisms for mediating disputes or a shared set of facts and values that hold us together, conflicts become so great that some feel there’s no option but to take up weapons. In the tinderbox of a tense, fractured nation, one person’s violence sparks a chain reaction of counter-violence that turns neighbors into adversaries that we can’t speak to with civility; that then justifies the destruction of “the Other” rather than seeing even the worst enemy as a child of God like

ourselves. This is how historians tell us the First World War started over a hundred years ago, as one assassin's bullet escalated immediately into a worldwide conflagration that cost an estimated ten million lives in trench warfare with chemical weapons, to say nothing of civilian casualties and the lifelong effects of war on its veterans. This is how all wars start between nations and societies to this day, including those in Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. These are all the result of conflicts within communities where injustice, bombast and hardened hearts prevail, rather than the prophet Micah's virtues of justice, mercy and humility.

Micah lived in the region of Judah south of Israel, after civil war had split the nation in two. He experiences brutal warfare as neighboring Israel is invaded by Assyrian armies, which almost manage to destroy Jerusalem also. He sees theological justification for this destruction, because of his nation's social sins, including covetousness, exploitation, bribery, and falsely seizing the land of poorer folks. Micah lays out the offenses of a corrupt "church and state" (so to speak), where both religious and political leaders put their own interests ahead of the people. But in this foolish era, the prophet also promises hope for a righteous remnant, whom God will gather into a protective folks like sheep. When God vindicates the righteous, all the underdogs will become top dogs. The preeminent example of this found in Micah 5, where little Bethlehem is promised "from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel". This ruler coming from the city of David will restore community, protect the poor and care for the nation. Most significantly in the midst of such conflict, Micah says the coming ruler "shall be the one of peace". That's the context of this beautiful verse, Micah 6:8, rightly famous for its clear summary of God's desire for humanity. In the pursuit of peace, following God's peaceful messenger, what matters more than anything else, even public piety and virtuous sacrifices, is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God".

I've often thought of Micah 6:8 as instruction to individuals, how people should live virtuous lives. But as the world marks a hundred years today since Armistice Day; as our nation laments the cost of war on veterans and their families; as communities seek peace in the context of gun crimes and verbal violence; I've needed the reminder that such peace is a corporate, shared responsibility. This is God's calling to us as a church, to be creators of peace by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly. As Christians in covenant with one another, God calls us like Carolyn and the other residents of Lena House to the hard work of living together with those who are different from us. God calls us into relationships inside and outside these walls with others who challenge and prod us, as a church that sometimes leads me where I would rather not go. In so doing, we practice setting aside the nationalist and tribal identities that insist on their own way alone.

The path to peace according to Micah follows the stepping stones of justice, mercy and humility. We might find differing ideas in this room about just what's involved in doing justice, informed by whether we have comparative advantages or disadvantages in this society. [Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary suggests](#) the gift of community is that we have something to learn about justice from someone who's different from ourselves, or who votes for the party we cannot stand. Members of a community dedicated to peace ask one another: "What do you know about justice that I should learn from you?" No one person fully knows the mind of God, and conversation across differences are healthy ways for fallible people to try and find the best way forward. What keeps this searching for justice from disintegrating into "my justice" and "your justice" are the companion practices in Micah of mercy (or kindness) and humility. Life together in community sometimes requires such humility as we seek the good of all, rather than of ourselves alone.

There's one example of such kindness and humility that sticks with me from this past week. Though it arose beyond the church, it exemplifies the sort of community that faithful people seeking peace can create. Here in our neighborhood, Dario Anselmo and Heather Edelson have been in contention several times to represent Edina in the state legislature. They are from different political parties and would

probably pursue justice in different ways. But they are neighbors here in the community, and their electoral debates have been admirably respectful. Still, it was a welcome surprise to see a picture of them on Facebook Wednesday night. Dario Anselmo and Heather Edelson—who just the day before had been opposing one another for thousands of votes—sat across the table from each other, drinks in hand and smiles on their faces. I am so proud to be in community with these great-hearted leaders. They demonstrate just the sort of humility and kindness that Micah prescribes, just the kind of compassion and care, civility without uniformity, and commitment to the common good that the world desperately needs right now. On this day that we lament the cost to so many lives in so many wars, this day when we give thanks for peace that puts an end to violence, thanks be to God for such examples of kindness and grace. May God help us continue to see—and reveal in our own lives—such offerings of justice, mercy and humility as we follow “the one of peace”. Amen.