

“Change of Heart”

January 29, 2023

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

In movies and television courtroom scenes are always exciting. Who can forget in “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Atticus Finch defending Tom Robinson, a Black man accused of sexual assault in the deep South? Or the scene in “And Justice for All” when Al Pacino is called out of order by the judge and he fires back, “You’re out of order! This whole court’s out of order!” Or when Tom Cruise, in “A Few Good Men,” has Jack Nicholson on the stand and tells him, “I want the truth!” Nicholson’s character shoots back, “You can’t handle the truth!” It’s all high drama. It’s an effective way to bring everyone to a crisis moment. A court scene lays bare all our behaviors and motives and complaints.

That’s why Micah uses it to illustrate God’s relationship with Israel. Israel is on trial and God is the plaintiff. Prior to this Micah has been describing all the ways the people have fallen short. They’ve ignored the needs of the poor, the rich have robbed people of their homes and declared war on the hungry. And for that God will hold them accountable. But in this scene, in the courtroom, their crimes aren’t just against their neighbors. God takes their crimes personally. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?” Then God lists all the ways they’ve been rescued: brought you up from Egypt, redeemed you from slavery, sent you Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead you. When they were in need God did nothing but good for them, yet here they are treating the weak around them like dirt.

And notice their response. They sound like arrogant children. “What do you want from us? A thousand rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, our firstborn? What’s enough?” These aren’t serious offers out of desperation. I think they’re meant to show just how cynical the people have become. They believe they’ve done everything they’re supposed to do. They’ve gone through all the motions of piety. They went to church on the right days and said the right prayers. They’re saying, “You’re out of order! We had a deal!”

As far as the people are concerned God has failed to live up to their agreement. They think all the trappings of worship they perform obligate God to act on their behalf. That’s the definition of idolatry. What the Bible calls idolatry is a transactional relationship between the people and a deity. It’s a way of exercising control over a god. But that’s not the kind of relationship God intends to have with Israel. God wants more than tokens, more than their material offerings. God wants a change of heart.

It’s easy to fall into that pattern of behavior where we go through the motions of devotion or piety without ever letting it really touch us. We want a reliable system. We want to know that what we do will be rewarded. People deserve to get paid for the work they do. That’s why we have contracts, so everyone knows what their responsibilities are. But God isn’t offering a contract. God invites us into a covenant, a relationship built on mutual love and respect. When

you go out of your way to do something for your spouse, it's not because you expect something in return. Or when you feed your child or comfort them when they can't sleep, it's not so they'll do something nice for you. Or when you sit with a parent who's in the process of dying, wetting their lips or gently encouraging them, it isn't because they can do anything for you in return. We do those things out of love, out of the respect we hold for them. That's the kind of relationship Micah says God wants to have with us. And it's displayed through our actions toward one another, by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

That part of this passage is familiar to a lot of us. It reads like a bumper sticker. And maybe it's so familiar that we've lost its full impact. Cultivating those qualities and practicing them is much harder to do than offering sacrifices and saying the right prayers. Why is that? Why do we find it so much more appealing to reduce our beliefs to empty statements of dogma or flashy displays of ritual? I think it boils down to our need for control. If we can turn even this beautiful line of scripture into a slogan, then we can compartmentalize it and keep it powerless. We can hold it at arm's length and avoid being shaped by it.

But suppose we did embrace it? What would happen to us if we allowed words like these to really embody us? How would our world change if we had a change of heart?

I think Jesus' words would start to make more sense to us. When he pronounces blessedness on so many conditions—poverty of spirit, meekness, mourning, longing for righteousness—it sounds all wrong. None of those conditions feels like a blessing. They're painful, usually, or at least lonely. Are we supposed to be striving for them? Should we be seeking impoverishment and grief? I don't think so. The truth is we don't need to seek them. Those conditions find us if we're open, if we allow ourselves to be moved by the circumstances of others or if we look deeply within ourselves to find our own longing, to hear the cries of our own spirits.

When we truly seek to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, we discover we're surrounded by a world of people who are hurting and we honor them. When Jesus lifts up the lives of those who struggle he invites his disciples to see the world around them in a new way. Instead of judging the poor in spirit, they're to see them as blessed and extend them compassion. Instead of avoiding people who mourn, they're to reach out to them and become a source of comfort. Instead of ignoring the cries of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they're to stand with them and be their advocates. And all of it is done in the awareness of our common humanity, with humility and grace.

This is how our hearts are changed. We're called to be open to the presence of God revealed in our connection to those around us. Then we can hear their cries of need and discover the blessedness that lies within them. We can see them beyond their condition, beyond their grief and respond to the deep presence of God within. Over and over the words of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus urge us to look deeper. They encourage us to stop reacting only to what we see on the surface of things and look for the heart we share with those around us. As the great

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, “All real living is meeting.” It’s when we encounter another at the place of their deepest need that we find what it means to live.

Micah put his generation on trial to shake them out of their stupor. In some ways I suppose we’re still in that courtroom. The jury’s still out on us, still waiting for a change of heart. Our world, so filled with violence and bigotry and fear, needs people willing to hear Micah’s words, willing to do justice and love kindness. Our world, so filled with pain and grief and longing, needs people who are able to see the blessedness that lies within those who are rejected or ignored. Maybe we are on trial and we’re being called to take the stand, to be witnesses for compassion and justice and let a change of heart begin with us.

Amen