

Sermon for Sunday, May 17, 2026

Micah 6:6-8

1 John 4:7-12

Matthew 25:31-46

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

The theme for today's sermon is the word "justice." This word is used 165 times or more in the Bible, 121 of which are in the Old Testament. Of the ten times that it is used in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, eight of those uses describe how God's people are to defend the poor, the widow, and the orphan so that they receive justice.

- Deuteronomy 24:17 You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge.
- Deuteronomy 27:19 "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice."

Now humans, being the broken people that we are, fail to uphold these teachings: always have and probably always will this side of heaven. That's why God sent prophets to proclaim messages from God and remind the people of God's decrees. Thus it is that the word justice comes up again in the passage from Micah 6. "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 and your God?" That passage reflects that the prophet has been watching the ancient Israelites make big and sometimes extravagant and lavish sacrifices at the Temple. Micah rejects this piety, names it as false and proclaims that these sacrifices mean nothing to God if the one providing the sacrifice is not ensuring that justice occurs, as well as kindness and humility before God.

Jesus had just one Bible and that was the teachings of the Old Testament. He likely knew those many passages containing the word justice, including the passage from Micah 6. There is little doubt that Jesus knew his Bible, and knew it well.

Jesus also lived in a country occupied by the Roman army. The New Testament as well as other historical sources provide ample evidence that the Roman conquerors were taxing people heavily in order to sustain their armies and line the pockets of those in power. Jesus also watched with great sorrow as pious Jews were

also being encouraged to make extravagant sacrifices at the Temple. (He demonstrates his disgust when he clears the Temple—an action described in all four gospels.)

Jesus' teaching from Matthew 25 makes God's position abundantly clear. The passage opens with the statement that the Son of Man, aka Jesus, will return and sit in judgment on all the peoples of the world. They will be divided into the sheep and the goats. In this particular case it's good to be a sheep. Why? Because the sheep are the ones who demonstrated generosity. The sheep are the ones who

- Recognized hunger and provided food,
- Recognized thirst and brought drink,
- Who saw strangers and welcomed them,
- Who saw the needs of the poor and gave clothing,
- Who acted when someone was sick by caring for them,
- Who remembered those in prison and visited them

As Jesus tells it, the sheep seem to be naïve, or oblivious to the impact of their actions. "When Lord? When did we see you like this?" And the one sitting on the throne of judgment responds, "When you did it to one of these, you did it to me!"

My friends, I have been very careful to avoid politics from this pulpit as your pastor, but today I'm going to be candid.

Why did Jesus speak this way? Because Jesus recognized that the broken political and religious system in which he lived was unjust. The system was hurting the hungry, thirsty, strangers aka immigrants, the sick, and prisoners. He recognized that the religious system in which he lived wasn't acting in accord with the clear teachings from the Old Testament.

I ask you, what has been happening for the last months here in our state? Federal programs that provide resources to our state have been drastically cut. (and don't get me started on why...it's not because of fraud...it has almost certainly been an act of revenge or retribution against our governor.) SNAP benefits, the means by which the very poor can receive food assistance have been drastically cut...especially in our state. There have been big cuts to Medicare and Medicaid; programs that help provide medical care for the elderly and the poor. Nursing homes are hurting because of these cuts. What happened to people with brown and black skin? They were picked up by ICE most of the time without cause. The decisions were made solely on skin color. What happened to them? They were quickly sent out of this state to inhumane detention

centers. Little medical care, no blankets, dozens of people sleeping in what amounted to giant chain link enclosures. Ever heard of the Nazi concentration camps? There is little difference between what happened in this state and elsewhere in this country and what happened 80+ years ago in Germany. All of these actions demonstrate a lack of empathy for those in need and vulnerable, and a lack of justice for those who have limited resources.

These actions also demonstrate fear and fear is a powerful motivator. When people in power are afraid of "the other" they make decisions to consolidate their power and prevent "the other" from gaining any leverage. Two thousand years ago the people in power, both political and religious, were afraid of Jesus and his teachings. That's why they hung him on a cross to die. The people in power denied Jesus justice in order to maintain their hold on power. They were trying to get rid of someone who was stirring up the common folks who were hungry, over-worked, sick, in prison, and ultimately without hope.

But our God had bigger and better plans than the paltry plans of humans with political and religious power. God's power was and is far greater than human power. God's plans were beyond the imagination of any mere human. God resurrected Jesus and did so out of love for the people of the world. Jesus' resurrection inspired his followers so profoundly that they went out into the world to share the good news of his life, death, and resurrection. This good news included his teachings about love of neighbor.

Social anthropologists, people who study ancient cultures, think that one explanation for the growth of Christianity in the first 250 years after Jesus' ascension to heaven is that his followers performed many of the teachings from the Matthew text. They fed the hungry and thirsty, they clothed the naked, they visited the sick and those that were in prison. These anthropologists write about how many sick people (including a multitude of slaves) were abandoned to die on the steps of Greek temples that dotted the empire with the hope that the god or goddess would provide healing. Ancient Christians would "rescue" these sick people and provide them with food and water. Sometimes the sick would recover and out of gratitude for their care would become Jesus followers. Those who provided the care didn't do so with an intent for any type of gain. They provided care because they knew from Jesus' teaching in Matthew that caring for those in need was like caring for him. For them, justice was about feeding the hungry, bringing water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing

those who are ill-clothed, caring for the sick, and visiting those who are in prison.

There is a story about a cynical British newspaper reporter who went to Calcutta to interview Mother Teresa. He walked into one of the Homes for the Dying that she established and spent time with her as she walked about the wards of sick and dying people. He asked her why she did this work. Her response was to kneel down with a bowl of water and a rag and begin to wash the face of a dying man. She turned to the reporter and said something like, "In this man's eyes I see the eyes of Jesus."

My friends, you are part of one of the most generous congregations I have ever been a part of. Think of all the many people we served through the community dinner. Think of all the pans of bars you have made for funerals over the years. Think of the outpouring of salads and desserts that were available at my farewell event on Wednesday. Through your actions you weren't just serving hungry people, you were serving Jesus.

To all of you, and especially to our graduates: do not be afraid as you go out into the world. Look into the eyes of the people around you and recognize that in those eyes, you are seeing Jesus. In the eyes of the people visiting the local food shelves. In the eyes of the people going to Hope and Harbor for jackets and sleeping bags. In the eyes of the women and children at the women's shelter. In the eyes of the sick whether in their homes or in the hospital. In the eyes of those imprisoned, and especially in the eyes of the people living in cages in detention centers without justice or a fair trial.

There is a quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr, that goes, "The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, But It Bends Toward Justice..." Justice and with it God's judgement will prevail in the end my friends. How should we respond to this knowledge? We should pursue justice, we should act with kindness, and walk humbly before God....acting with generosity toward the people we meet...remembering that we are serving God when we serve them.

Researchers have learned that Martin Luther King Jr. was quoting a 19th century pastor by the name of Theodore Parker. It's important to me that the attribution goes to the appropriate person.