

Judgment, Salvation, Challenge
Reading from the Old Testament: Micah 1:3-5; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8
Reading from the New Testament: John 18:36

Over the past couple of years, I've been trying to overcome the liberal arts deficiencies of a general business undergrad degree by including in my reading list some of the important works of literature I had missed while busily failing to master concepts like arbitrage and liquidity ratios. This literary journey has been rewarded by the experience of reaching the last page of works like *East of Eden*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road* (strange), and *All's Quiet on the Western Front*. I've managed half of *The Brothers Karamozov* and like to tell myself I'll return to it and finish, but the jury's still out.

Recently, I read Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and was amazed by his ability to produce a nonfiction, true crime work that read just like a novel. It's the carefully detailed story of the events leading up to, including, and following the 1959 murder of the Clutters, a prominent farming family of four in rural western Kansas.

The murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, were drifters who met in prison and launched their heinous plan to drive the 400 miles

from Olathe, Kansas to Holcomb, Kansas, where they would in the dark of night, rob and kill the Clutter family, acting on the tip of a fellow prisoner who claimed to have worked on the Clutter farm and alleged that Mr. Clutter had a big safe with stacks of cash in the farm office located inside his home.

There was no safe, nor was there any money apart from some forty dollars and change. Nevertheless, they proceeded to murder the Clutters, get in the car and drive back to Olathe. From there they drove west, down into Mexico, back to Kansas City, south to Miami, and back out west to Las Vegas before being caught, tried, and hung back in Kansas, never having found whatever lives they were chasing.

In a letter to Perry Smith, Willie-Jay, a former prison mate described Perry with these words. "You are a man of extreme passion, a hungry man not quite sure where his appetite lies ... You exist in a half-world suspended between two superstructures, one self-expression and the other self-destruction." Perry described his own worldview saying, "As long as you live, there's always something waiting; and even if it's bad, and you know it's bad, what can you do? You can't stop living." After trial, conviction, appeals, and delays, the state of Kansas

would offer the means to the end of Perry's waiting upon the consequence of his self-destructive life. He and Hickock would, in the eyes of the state, reap what they had sown on a Kansas farm. At the gallows, Perry said, "It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did. Even inappropriate. But I do. I do apologize." (*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote) Of course, no human entity can presume to conclude what judgment God would inveigh on the whole tragic affair other than to wonder at the profundity of God's mercy demonstrated on the cross in the face of humanity's capacity for cruelty.

One thing Perry did understand was the exhaustion and madness that accompanies the waiting as we ponder the consequences of or judgment upon our injurious or self-destructive thoughts, words, and deeds. If Calvin was right, it is a universal human experience. The child stands over the broken lamp; the liability borne by the unprepared, ill-equipped person who fails in their responsibility for the well-being of others; the sweating brow that travels with hands engaged in white collar coverup; the period between arrest and trial and between trial and verdict; the fear that hides behind unfaithfulness. Will I be caught? Will I be exposed? Will the consequence be painful? In the end

the judgments that hound us most are not the judgment of God but the judgments we bring upon ourselves, for as Perry Smith, Israel, and you may have come to understand, the mercy of God tends to be exponentially greater than the mercy of the aggrieved, the neighbor, or the state.

You see, what's missing in the tragic drama of dissolution recorded in Capote's work is the metanarrative, the overarching, universal story into which all of our stories must be put in context if there is to be any sense or meaning found in life. The postmodern mind is skeptical of metanarratives, preferring a realism that is suspicious of concepts like resolution, reconciliation, redemption, and hope; and thus, leaving the audience to dwell in the seemingly unresolvable chaos of the universe. To put it simply, in such a world *The Sound of Music* may be admired as escapism, but *Ordinary People* or *Gone Girl* or *Wind River* are respected as truth. All of this is to say that the question in the back of our minds when we enter this sanctuary is whether what we are doing here is fantasy or truth. Is there a larger story to make sense of our days, our relationships, our purpose, our very existence?

In our readings today from the prophet Micah we see the outline of the metanarrative, the larger story, the gospel through which our lives find meaning. In turn the readings move us through the stages of judgment, salvation, and purpose.

Micah and his contemporary, Isaiah, as prophets, hold the unenviable position of those called and commissioned to speak truth to power. The eighth century BCE setting is a divided nation, Israel in the north and Judah in the south; another stage in dismantling of David's united kingdom. The big dog in the neighborhood is Assyria whose kings Shalmaneser and Sargon represent an ever-present military threat. Soon Israel will fall to the Assyrians while Judah will fall a hundred years later to the Babylonians.

Both Micah and Isaiah, speaking in Jerusalem during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah indicate the coming collapse of Israel and Judah, pointing to the nations' multiple sins including the worship of idols, the usurpation of property driven by the lust for wealth, the neglect of the poor, and the injustices of the judicial system. Micah declares the Lord's disfavor toward a society where the powerful oppress the powerless, where laborers are exploited, and where the

courts are corrupt, victimizing the poor and vulnerable. Micah says, “Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!” This theme is echoed by Isaiah in Judah and Amos in Israel.

In fact, it is a theme treated throughout the Old and New Testaments, at least as much if not more than any other subject. Isaiah says, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings ... Trample my courts no more ... cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Likewise, Amos says, “I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore, the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time ... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate” (*the gate being the courtroom in that culture.*)

From the challenge to welcome the stranger, relieve the debtor, and free the slaves in Leviticus to the calls for justice in the prophets, to the reversal of fortune in Mary’s Magnificat, to Christ’s blessings to the

poor and the disenfranchised in the Gospels, we cannot read the Bible and ignore the plight of the vulnerable, the hungry, the victims of injustice. To do so would be to betray what is central to the biblical witness. For in contrast to what far too many Christians would have you believe, comparing what the Bible has to say about the poor, the disenfranchised, and the vulnerable with what the Bible has to say about sex is like comparing a novel to a postcard.

In these tense days of polarized and digitally programmed thought and prejudice, we truly need to come back to the Bible. You know our greatest threat is not armed invasion. Our greatest threat is hidden in algorithms that literally program your thought, rewire your brain, and twist your sense of reality. Blind loyalty to tribal creed leaves us with a distorted and unjust view of our neighbors. In our Bible study this week Cynthia McClelland reminded us of a quote that reflects our default setting whenever we judge anyone disagreeable or just different from us. Totally ignoring their context or their challenges, we assume they are “just like us, but somehow gone wrong.”

In one sense, the fundamentalist, the hardcore evangelical is right, we need to go back to the Bible, but not to use it as a weapon to

exclude or judge others, not to read it literally in disregard to and fear of what we learn in science, not to read it, cherry picking verses to make God fit our worldview. Rather, we need to go back to the Bible to understand our humanity and God's majesty; our brokenness and God's enduring mercy; our weakness and God's strength. We need to go back to the Bible to heed the warning of the prophets and hear the promise and call of the Gospel. For without it, we are left with only the pessimism and despair of the novel without a metanarrative. We are left with Kurtz on the last page of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, crying out, "*The horror! The horror!*"

Yet, Micah the prophet and the Bible as a whole do not leave us there. Yes, we must acknowledge our brokenness, our sin, and our dependence on the mercy of God, but just as our prayers of confession are followed by the reading of the Gospel, Micah points to our sin and then points to our hope in the God who refuses to let us go. Yes, the earthly consequences of our sins are real and painful, but there is redemption, and there is always hope. "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 ... 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.” *O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie ... yet in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Don't tell me the Old Testament is hopeless, the prophets see beyond brokenness and consequence to redemption. And even then, the prophet is not through with us. Redeemed by the mercy of God, we, in gratitude heed the call of God. “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?”

After election day, some rejoice, some despair, some crow, some complain, and far, far too many pontificate; all of which fails to address God's persistent and clear call for all of us together to address issues of inequity, injustice, poverty, and hospitality. Few things are so clearly mandated in scripture. We can debate the means, but we cannot deny or escape the mandate. To ignore the mandate is to bear the consequences. Israel and then Judah would fall. When we neglect or

ignore some in the community, the whole community will eventually suffer.

Do justice. Love Kindness. Walk humbly with our God. It's time to disarm or disconnect the hardwiring of hostile, divisive zealot voices, set aside the plague of hyper-partisan prejudice, and mold our lives to the mandate. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with our God. Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world, and yet it is present in the world wherever Christ's servants do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God.

This summer we had the privilege to spend some time with a bright young woman possessing a heart bigger than the sky over Montana. She was in town to work at the Freedom School, the organization that provides a nurturing learning environment for children in areas of food insecurity and high poverty. One primary goal for the summer is to help the students not lose over the summer whatever progress they had made in the previous school year. Just after we picked up our friend, she received a phone call. It was from a student she had worked with the previous summer who wanted some advice and counsel in regard to a test or assignment that was stressing

her out. Our friend spoke to her with such grace, as if the student was a treasured member of her family, which in a way she was. It had been a year since she taught her, but a connection had been made and valued. Folks, it is that and not campaign promises that will change the world. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. Let us set aside partisan prejudices and do the simple, faithful work God has told us repeatedly to do. There is a metanarrative. *It's not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums; with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.*

Many of you know that our younger son works with students on the autism spectrum who've exhibited challenging behavior and difficulty in traditional schools. In these angry days when judgment and blame end with a period instead of a comma, Seth shared with me this wise educator proverb I had not heard before: Before you correct, connect. With Micah let us move beyond judgment, set aside grievance, bury prejudice, embrace redemption, and do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God. For such is the way of Christ's kingdom. Amen.