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Micah 6:1-8

6:1 Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

6:2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

6:3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

6:4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

6:5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

6:6 "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?

6:7 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?"

6:8 God 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?

Matthew 5:1-12

5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

5:2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Proclamation of the Word

"Lord, Bless this Mess!" read the sign hanging in the family kitchen. There were dirty dishes in the sink, a harried mom, an unhappy three year old, and teh clock ticking slowly by while mom waits on

reinforcements from an equally exhausted spouse to return home from a 10 hour work day. Lord, bless this mess.

We usually do not think of a mess as a blessing.

Blessing looks like wealth, status, power, celebrity, and being on the winning team.

Blessing is being on top, not the the bottom of the ladder or 3rd string of the team roster.

Blessing looks like perfect Instagram photo with just the right filter to appear that we have our life together.

Blessing looks like the guy with the right car, the right job, the perfect family.

Bless this mess?

Well, that is exactly what Jesus teaches us. In the last few weeks, we have been learning the many roles of Jesus. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Christ child. And in these weeks we keep unwrapping that gift to learn who this Jesus is. In the weeks of Epiphany, meaning revelation, God reveals his Son to us. He is the Word made flesh. He is Savior of the World. He is king of Kings. He is the Beloved Son. When we read last week that Jesus called the first disciples, we learn that Jesus is the Proclaimer of the Kingdom. And today we hear of Jesus being a prophet like Moses who ascends to the mountain and begins to teach. And thus begins the great Sermon on the Mount as we call it.

Just a bit of background. Moses is considered the greatest prophet of the faith in the Old Testament and Covenant. Moses was the one who helped lead the children out of slavery and crossed the Red Sea. It was Moses who wandered with the Hebrew children, serving and leading as God's instrument. And most of us remember that it was Moses that went up to Mt. Sinai and received the Law- the 10 Commandments. This is Torah- the teachings of God for how the people are to live in a covenant relationship. If you recall the commandments are ways to love God and love our neighbors. They attributed the first 5 books, the Torah, to Moses. In Deut. 18:15 Moses says the Lord shall raise up a prophet like me, one of us, to whom you will listen. And they have been looking for this prophet like Moses ever since. When John the Baptist begins his ministry, he is asked "Are you the prophet we have been waiting for?" (John) In feeding 5000 John 6, is this the "Prophet who is to come into the world?" remembering how Moses and the people ate manna in the wilderness.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the ONE who was promised. Like Moses, Jesus spends his first years in Egypt. His family was refugees fleeing an unhinged tyrant named Herod. Matthew tells us of Jesus' time in the wilderness facing the devil just as Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness. And then today this passage reminds us of Moses going up the mountain where God would reveal his covenant to his people. Jesus is doing the same thing by teaching.

Jesus is the Prophet like Moses to whom we should listen. And Jesus begins by exercising the power to bless. Jesus paints a picture of blessing that may sound strange to our ears. It sounded strange to

those disciples, too. In the Old Testament we read of other "Beatitudes." Blessed is the same word as "Happy."

Proverbs 3:13 "Happy are those who seek wisdom and gain understanding."

Psalms 119:1-2- "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the way of the LORD.

Happy are those who keep His decrees who seek God with their whole heart."

Wisdom teachings is a thread through the Old Testament. The conventional wisdom was that if you do right, you will be blessed. If you keep the law and commandments, it will go well with you. If you do wrong, you will suffer.

Jesus comes with a new unconventional wisdom. He describes people who are a mess or who by circumstances are dealing with a mess: hurting, working for peace, starving for righteousness. And like Mary sang in the *magnificat* God comes to the vulnerable, the weak while the proud and mighty are brought down.

Jesus announces how it is in the Kingdom of God. God has a particular love for the messed up. Listen to such familiar words in fresh way according to Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

³ "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

⁴ "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

⁵ "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

And so on...

The blessing is in knowing one needs God, loves and worships God above all else.. "With less of you there is more of God and his rule," is the way Peterson puts it.

That sounds a lot like the "Great Requirement" from the prophet Micah. "What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." The blessings of God are upon those who out of their great need, know they joy of relying on God. Walking humbly with God is the way of Blessing. Seeking Justice and loving kindness is the way of blessing.

In Micah God tells the people their story because it seems they have forgotten it. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Dean of American Jewish University,ⁱ reminds us of our common story,

The first great story in the Torah is of a God who yearns to bestow love. To be able to be loving, God has to create another, a someone who can receive that love and reciprocate it. So God creates an entire cosmos so that somewhere there might develop a creature with sufficient consciousness that can receive God's love and respond to it in kind. And if that reciprocal generating love isn't enough, the Torah also tells us that we humans are uniquely reflective of God's image, so that if God needs to

bestow and receive love, then we are most God-like when we are also receiving and giving love to each other. Hesed, love, is the bottom line of Judaism's first grand narrative.

The second great story of the Torah is of a small group of Semites who wander down into Egypt to avoid starvation, there they are enslaved, despised, and there they are considered to be to'evot - abominable. The God of the Hebrews hears the cries of the outcast; this God favors the cause of the weak, the despised, and the outcast. God goes down to Egypt to liberate those Hebrew slaves and to vanquish Pharaoh. This story is more true than mere history; this dynamic arc toward freedom continues to be operative at all times and in every place. The God of Israel is a God of justice, correctly recognized to be the enemy of the Ayatollah's, the Führers, the Commissars, and all the despots who would trample the human soul. Mishpat, justice, is the bottom line of Judaism's second grand narrative.

This is the bottom line of our faith, Justice and Love. The Rabbis say God has two daughters, justice and steadfast love. ⁱⁱ

Jesus comes from this faith and knows his Torah, his Bible. He adds more clarification. He teaches an unconventional wisdom. He talks of the Kingdom of God that reverses how we think of blessing. The kingdom is the great reversal.

Remember another time that blessing is reversed in the Bible? When Joseph has two sons born in Egypt, Ephraim and Mannaseh, he takes them to his father, Jacob, for a blessing. It was tradition that the right hand would bless the first-born son. Jacob went to bless the boys and crossed his hands placing his left hand on the older boy and the right hand on the younger. Joseph tries to stop his father, but Jacob says, I know what I am doing. Jacob blesses the lesser son. The rightful heir gets dissed. Jacob choose the lesser son, the least important.

Jesus blesses the lesser people, the least of these, the messed up ones. Jesus brings a kingdom that is a great reversal. Jesus does not do things as the world does or as small-minded, selfish, and fearful people do. But consider who Jesus is. He is the Savior of the world. He is the king of kings. He is the Beloved Son, and the Proclaimer of the Kingdom of God. And the first thing he does to bless. Like Jacob he knows exactly what he is doing.

And he calls his disciples to bless the way he blesses- with an eye on the least of these, the vulnerable, and the ones that God chooses to honor in his kingdom. God's justice (*mishpat*) is always with an eye for those in society who are without rights, in Old Testament language- the orphan, the widow, the stranger in your land. And Jesus practices God's (*hesed*) God's steadfast love while walking humbly with God.

Jesus is a prophet like Moses- the one to whom we must listen. To follow him, we must first bless- bless God, bless the suffering, bless our neighbor, our own well being is wrapped up in it.

Who inspires you to be a blessing? I think of Grandma- to me, she was the bravest, most faithful, loving and just person I knew. She graduated Butler University and hopped a bus from Indianapolis to

Miami, FL in the 1920's. She was the first Secretary to the first President of Miami University. I thought she was so smart, a trailblazer.

But I learned something last year that told me more about her Christian Character. She knew her Bible- by her bed. She read her scriptures for every Sunday worship- even when she could no longer attend. My mother's family moved to Greenville in 1940. I recall leafing through my mother's Greenville High yearbooks and noticing strange names like Cohen, Heller, and Saltzman- Jewish names. I was fascinated by that. I did not know any Jewish people growing up in York, SC. But last year my uncle told me about when he was a boy starting Cub Scouts. There was a little Jewish boy that wanted to join. None of the other mothers would serve as the Den Mother and have them meet in their homes so Grandma did. He said in the 1940s there was much suspicion about people coming from Eastern Europe. People thought they were secret Nazi spies. There was plenty of prejudice against the Jews who came seeking shelter and work in Greenville, SC.

My Grandma welcomed that Jewish child into her home and befriended his mother. She learned to ignore the whispers behind her back.

Grandma Hallie- knew that she had been saved by grace through faith, that she had the power to bless. She knew that Jesus said welcome the stranger, the least of these, and by doing so you welcome me. That may be a small act, but it is a reminder to me that anyone can bless or curse. The choice is ours.

Will you exercise the power to bless?

May we decrease so that Christ might increase among us. This we pray in His name, Amen.

ⁱ Bradley, Shavit Artson, *Mishpat Ve Hesed: Love and Justice*, September 29, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-bradley-shavit-artson/mishpat-vehesed-love-just_b_3975783.html

ⁱⁱ The word for justice is *mishpat* in Hebrew .The word for mercy or kindness grows out of the Hebrew word for "steadfast love" *hesed*.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am indebted to the work of Jim Somerville in "Power to Bless" A Sermon for Every Sunday: video sermons from America's best preachers for every Sunday of the Liturgical Year