

Order in the Court!

Micah 6:1-8

When we turn on the television in the evening, we have a vast array of choices for our viewing pleasure – news, interviews, music, comedy, drama, reality, and many others. But there is one particular genre that we turn to most often – we are intrigued by crime solvers and courtroom dramas. There are more of these types of programs than any other. The *Law and Order* and *CSI* series of dramas alone account for eight separate programs that I can count. There are many others. We are utterly fascinated with the verbal sparring and eloquent statements of prosecution and defense attorneys. The television industry continues to turn out these shows that have gripping courtroom scenes where justice is sometimes, and sometimes not, meted out. Added to that is the world of real courtroom drama. We are captivated with celebrity and other high profile criminals, following their court cases in the newspapers and on television.

With one lawyer for every 200 citizens in our country, legal proceedings are a way of life. They also had their place in ancient times. Our reading from Micah this morning is high courtroom drama. But this is not an ordinary case being brought before an ordinary judge. Imagine the scene. The prophet Micah walks in and takes his seat at the prosecutor's table. Then over there, the jury files in – they are the mountains, hills, and very foundations of the earth. What an impressive array they make! Next, over here, the defendant is led in. It is none other than the People Israel. And then from somewhere a voice announces, "All rise." Quietness settles upon the courtroom. The door opens and a dominating figure wearing a black robe enters. He looks around and then sits behind the judge's bench. The bailiff cries out, "Order in the court! Court is now in session, the honorable Judge God presiding." Now this is a courtroom scene that whets our appetites. This is the kind of stuff that makes the front pages.

The trial opens. Micah the prosecutor says to the defendant Israel, "Rise, plead your case." But then Micah cuts off any response and immediately presses forward to state that God is bringing this case against the people Israel. The actual charge is implied rather than explicitly stated – Israel has grown tired of God and has chosen to go its own way. The mountains, hills, and foundations of the earth have been called to hear this case as the jury because they were present when God ratified his covenant with his people and they served as witnesses to that covenant.

In verse three, God takes over from Micah and addresses the defendant. But he doesn't charge them directly. Instead he asks two questions of Israel to inquire whether they believe they have something with which to charge God. God's first question is: "What have I done to you?" And his second is, "In what have I wearied you?"

And then God, again preempting the counsel Micah, pleads his own case in verses four and five. Consider the evidence of history, God suggests to the court. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, I gave my people freedom. When they were without leaders I gave them Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and others. When their very existence was threatened in Moab by King Balak, I rescued them yet again. When they crossed the Jordan River I was there protecting and leading them.

Can you see God pacing before the jury of mountains and hills, raising his arms now and again for emphasis, his voice rising and falling in volume and intensity? Clearly, God says to the jury, clearly the evidence I have presented substantiates the fact that whatever the reason for Israel's failure, it cannot be blamed on God, but rather on Israel turning away from God.

God rests his case and returns to his seat behind the bench. By the way, you may have been struck by the fact that in this courtroom case God is both the prosecutor and judge – highly irregular by our standards. But I'm sure the theological implications of God's dual role are not lost on you.

But this is a fair trial. Now, in verse six, the defendant Israel is given the opportunity to take the stand in its own defense. It does not dispute the charges, nor the evidence that God has presented. The accused simply asks its own question: What must I do to set things straight? But the actual phrasing of

the question, “With what shall I come before the Lord?” betrays the fact that Israel still does not understand what is going on. Israel assumes that the solution to its crime is to be found in ritual activity. The people are trying to buy off God with substitutes for piety.

To compound the problem Israel also tries to substitute quantity for quality. Would God like burnt offerings of yearling calves? Surely that would satisfy him. Or perhaps thousands of rams and millions of gallons of oil. The sarcasm drips from the defendant. If that’s not enough, Israel says, it could even sacrifice its first born son. Nothing is too good for God, the people imply.

The trial opened with Micah, moved to God presenting his case, then the response from the defendant Israel. Now it closes at verse eight with Micah the counsel. Micah rises from the prosecutor’s table, moves over to the jury, but then turns and moves back to the defendant’s table and addresses Israel. And he delivers what has to be one of the most stunning and shortest closing arguments in the annals of jurisprudence. Micah leans over, places his hands on the table, looks directly into Israel’s eyes, and in measured tones says, “God gave you the law and it is good. In response, what does the Lord require of you?” Micah pauses for effect, and then says, “Three things is all. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.”

That’s it. Case closed. The courtroom drama is ended. We aren’t given any more. But we know if we could have watched the mountains and hills and foundations of the earth file out to the jury room they would have quickly returned with the verdict: Guilty. And Micah the prosecutor had already given the defendant Israel the remedy.

Why have I gone to this extent to dramatize this courtroom scene? Because it is our courtroom scene. We are in it. We are the defendant, the people Christian. Far too often in our lives we try to fill the vacuum of justice with frenzied activity. We try to worship more, to pray more fervently, to repent more thoroughly. But if it is all done by quantity and not quality, if it is done without the heart of true religion, then it is all done for naught. Micah’s solution for Israel is the same solution for us – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

It is most important as we look again at verse eight to note that these three stipulations are not connected by “or” but rather by “and.” The three form a cooperative and untied whole. One cannot be without any of the other two.

Do justice means we are to act with equity, fairness, and deference to those who are in a weaker social position. It is the opposite of violence, oppression, fraud, and lying.

Love kindness is better rendered as loving-kindness. It is giving where no giving is required. It acts where no action is demanded. It penetrates both attitudes and activities. It is the addition of generosity, loyalty, and graciousness to all acts of justice and assistance.

Walk humbly with God refers to our daily lifestyle of relationship with God, which lies at the heart of religion. It is living by faith, which is giving God first place in our lives. Humbleness is the opposite of pride. Pride puts us first. Humbleness puts God first and then others in his name. When we have put God first each and every day, then all the rest falls into place.

When we sense in our moments of doubt and introspection that we are in God’s courtroom facing something of what Israel faced from God, that we have grown tired of God and chosen to go our own way, and we wonder what God actually wants from us, then it is time to return to these three foundations. Not one. Not two. But all three. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. At first it may not sound like much, but it is enough for a lifetime. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 30 January 2011