

Sermon: February 12, 2017 – Micah 6: 6-8 and Matthew 5: 21-24
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley

At our best, when our words and actions align with God's, this is who we are: we are a people of reconciliation, and justice, and mercy.

The prophet Micah, seeking God's path in a time of great political turmoil, pictures a court case in which the people of Israel are standing before God, negotiating what kind of sacrifice can be brought to the altar to put things right between them and their maker, and a verdict is issued which says this: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Even in the midst of chaos – especially in the midst of chaos - the people are told that their love for God is shown, by treating those in precarious circumstances with kindness. And until the people turned around – "repented", to use a good Biblical word – and started treating others with the respect that each child of God is entitled to, the offerings and sacrifices they brought to the altar of the Lord might as well be left to rot, for their gifts would be of no interest to God. Until the people understood and enacted God's actual will – to live together in harmony – none of their ritual actions mattered.

For this is who we are: we are a people of reconciliation, and justice, and mercy.

Jesus, speaking some 750 years after Micah, addressed the same issue. In his Sermon on the Mount, which described to his disciples what their communal life must strive for, he says this: "if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar...go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24) Your desire to be in a personal relationship with God becomes available to you only when you are in positive relationship with others. Our hymns, our prayers, our devotion gain credibility only when we also seek healing in our broken relationships. Whether that is ending the animosity of a long-standing personal feud, or walking toward reconciliation with the first peoples who inhabited this land, or addressing the brokenness in our relationship with the environment, that acknowledgement of Christ's heart for forgiveness and wholeness is the first step in our journey of faith. When we seek this reconciliation, our lives become integrated; when we attempt pious actions in our lives while building barriers between us and others, we become dis-integrated.

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It's hard to be people of reconciliation and justice and mercy these days, when everything around us seems so chaotic. Every day, I take a deep breath before turning on the news, wondering whether the lead story will be the most recent ridiculous spat initiated by the White House, or the most recent attack at a Mosque or a school or a shopping centre, or if the lead story might actually be something else. Perhaps my perception of this is skewed somewhat by our recent trip to the USA, where the newsfeed was about 95% White House and 5% everything else, but there continues to be a lot of yelling and very little listening in our world, at least the world as reported in the news and by social media.

At times, I wonder: am I just behind the times or is the current preoccupation with the negative and the sensational a form of brokenness that needs healing? I put this question to our young-adult children, who range in age from 24 to 28, and to paraphrase their response I got a two-fold answer: some of the negativity and sharpness is legitimate, with the younger generation refusing to be silenced when they identify entitlement and privilege; but my kids also experience a culture, particularly online, that places the greatest value on those who can be most cynical and sarcastic, with anyone who claims to be "post"-something: post-modern, post-theistic, post-democratic, getting extra points. Being quick off the mark with something snarky will get you

WAY more followers than taking your time to weigh various opinions and propose something constructive, and my kids are every bit as frustrated by that as I am.

And in this world, we are still to be a people of reconciliation, and justice, and mercy.

In the midst of this, are there actions we can engage in to accept Micah's challenge to justice, kindness and walking humbly with the Divine? How do we step into Christ's vision of reconciliation in times that are nothing short of outrageous? Three actions come to mind.

The first, is to actually *want* reconciliation. When I was in my twenties, I loved the power of a grudge. There were people who had wronged me, and I basked in the righteous indignation of being mistreated. And not only did I love the power of a grudge in my own life, but in other's lives as well: I could remember who had wronged my friends, and happily fanned those embers along with my own. Then at some point – I honestly can't remember when or how – I simply woke up to how much these grudges were diminishing my life. I finally "got" what Jesus was saying about reconciliation opening the door to our actually embracing God's gift of life.

Seeking reconciliation, almost always, has been at least as much about letting go of my ego needs, as it has been about forgiving the words or actions of the other person, or system, or circumstance. To be sure, the rules change completely when there has been violence or deep betrayal or other forms of abuse – those require a different approach, and extra supports, and a need to never compromise your safety – but in many of my life's circumstances the number one factor standing between me and forgiveness, has been my desire to hold on to my hurt feelings. I acknowledge the complexity of human beings and their relationships, and I also recognize how often people remain at odds with each other for the simple reason that they really don't want the rift to be healed. Being wronged gives me a currency I can tuck away in my wallet and use it as needed, and when I forgive, I exchange that rainy-day fund for the freedom to move forward, unencumbered by past brokenness and fully responsible for what comes next. To seek reconciliation, what we need first of all, is a willingness to make that exchange.

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The second action is found in an article written this week by Arianna Huffington. She writes, "Have you heard about the latest outrage? Can you believe what the administration just did? I'm not actually talking about anything specific, but between the time I'm writing this and the time you're reading it, there will no doubt have been plenty of examples. Your inbox and notifications are likely full of them. Your friends are probably texting you about them. You may well be talking about them at dinner tonight, before settling in to watch outraged pundits rehash them. Then there's one last check for late-breaking outrages before a night of restless, fitful sleep. In the morning, with a check on the accumulation of whatever new outrages rained down overnight, the cycle starts all over again.

"It's not that the outrage is unwarranted," she continues. "This is high stakes and it really matters. But that's precisely why it's so important to take back control of how we react. Because only then will we be able to mitigate the effects of those presidential actions on the lives of people most vulnerable to them.... Whatever you do, don't just let yourself get stuck in the outrage storm—that particular weather pattern is likely to be here for a long time. Remember, you have the power to step out of the storm, think carefully about how best to channel your valuable energy, and then take action."

As much as I want to just move on and stop talking about the new US Administration, I have allowed myself to be completely sucked in to what Arianna describes as "the outrage storm." I check my phone for news updates way too often, I find myself paying way too much attention to the chirping of social media, and in the midst of it I stop even listening for Christ's voice. But that voice of truth is always there, the holy voice at the eye of the storm, calling me to let go of

my indignation and unproductive outrage and find positive places to let God's love be known. Sometimes that will involve resistance and protest, just as it did in Jesus' life; sometimes it will mean speaking our truth or, conversely, refusing to be drawn into shouting matches; sometimes it will mean personally befriending those who are being specifically targeted. It comes down to making a decision about who is setting the agenda: the White House, or public opinion, or the media, or my friends... or the calm, focused wisdom of an itinerant preacher from the town of Nazareth. It's up to me, as to which voices I will allow to shape my life, and this morning I am casting one big vote in favour of Christ Jesus and his message of radical, path-altering love.

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The third action, is one we get to do, together, today: come to table. When Jesus sat down with the masses at the Sermon on the Mount, he set the standards for who we are to be, together. And one of the ways his intention for reconciliation gets put into action, is when we share bread and cup.

In a world that spends so much time focused on fear, and identifying whom to fear, Christ calls us, all of us, to table. At his last supper with those who loved him, he called them and us to come together as a community where there are no barriers, no judgmentalism, no superiority, only love. In today's Invitation to the Table, I'll be giving some time for us to name to God our intention to be a people of forgiveness and new life, to say a personal YES to become Christ's body of love in a world that is shouting at us to be something else.

For this, my friends in Christ, is who we are: we are a people of reconciliation, and justice, and mercy. And for this, we give thanks to God, the author of love, Amen.

Reference cited:

Huffington, Arianna. "How to Get Out of the Cycle of Outrage In a Trump World - *If we live in a perpetual state of outrage, Trump wins.*" <https://journal.thriveglobal.com/how-to-get-out-of-the-cycle-of-outrage-in-a-trump-world-ffc5b2aa1b5f#.5c2smurl7>

And for further reading – re our desire to hang on to past wrongs:

Brett, Regina. *God is Always Hiring: 50 lessons for finding fulfilling work*. NYC: Grand Central Publishing, 2015. Esp. pp. 60-69, 120-122.

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