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Sermon for June 26, 2011

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A

Scripture Text: Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 10:40-42

All That God Asks of Us

At first blush the pairing of these two scripture texts seems tenuous. The prophet Micah, speaking for God to the people of Israel, describes a scene out of a court of law where the accuser – God – challenges the accused – the people of Israel – to justify their actions; while the three verses out of the Gospel of Matthew merely seem to be the concluding remarks of Jesus as he prepares the disciples to be sent out into the larger community on their first of many missionary forays. One passage challenges a people who have strayed from the covenant commitments they made with God to show their love and care for God through their love and care for others and the other seems to encourage those about to head out on their own that how they are welcomed by those whom they go to witness to will in some way or another determine those person's ultimate reward.

So it is no surprise at all that there might be some amount of confusion when it comes to the task of figuring out what might possibly link these two texts together and what if anything these texts and whatever linkage there might be might have to say to us right here and now.

But, before we seek to understand the possible linkages, let us first spend a little time in understanding the contexts of these two texts and what they might say individually to us today.

The prophet Micah, whose name literally asks the question “Who is like Yahweh?” was called by God to challenge the leaders and rulers of Israel to consider how far they had strayed from keeping their covenant with God and to change their ways by returning to the covenantal practice of caring for all of humanity instead of simply flaunting their wealth and power and caring only for their own comfort and well being. Through a series of oracles and prophesies Micah calls attention to the unjust practices of the ruling elite that do nothing more than keep the poor and dispossessed in a constant state of poverty and oppression while at the very same time line the pockets of the wealthy elite and their allies with ill gotten wealth. The clear and unambiguous theological message of Micah is that God's favor and energy has been and always will be

focused on those who are unable to defend themselves against the hostile practices of those who gain their wealth through excessive interest rates, unjust lending practices, corrupt business dealings and any number of strong arm tactics whose only aim is to strip away the possessions and dignity of some for the sole benefit of others. And this theological inclination of Micah's is no better illustrated than in the sixth chapter of this short prophetic book where God, speaking through the prophet, convenes a trial against these unjust rulers of Israel.

In a passionate speech, Yahweh, the God of Israel, lays out the case against these rulers by first reminding them of all that God has done on their behalf. God reminds them that they once were nothing more than an itinerant band of former Egyptian slaves who, because of God, were not only freed from the bonds of slavery but also given and land and a place to call their own where they could prosper. And God wonders what God has done to them that would make them turn their backs upon God; would make them reject their covenantal promise to be God's people by showing their love for God through how they treated those of less power and prestige than themselves.

But in an almost scripted response, the ruling elite answer God's charges and questions in what seems to be the only way they know how; by throwing money and wealth at the situation in hopes that if they give God enough fancy and precious things, God will be appeased and they will be left to continue their lives as if nothing had happened. And so they start the bargaining. Ornate worship that includes expensive gifts of immeasurable amounts of precious oil or an uncountable number of expensive offerings of real assets or possibly the most precious of all, the sacrifice of a human life; one of their own, one with the potential to be one to the powerful elite themselves someday not one of the peasants they oppress but one who could someday help to continue their reign of wealth.

But God's favor and God's desire is not to be handed expensive gifts but to care for those who are unable to care for themselves. So God demands that the ruling elite give not from their immense ill gotten wealth but rather that they offer to God their very lives by turning away from all of their unjust and harmful practices and turning to those who have been harmed and instead of taking *from them* whatever they are able to extract and giving *to them* the care, respect and dignity they need and deserve because regardless of wealth or power or position, in God's eyes all persons are children of God and thus deserving of care, love and acceptance.

Many years later, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew writes down, for an emerging Christian Community, a theological narrative about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the one called Jesus the Messiah. Among the many strands that are interwoven in this gospel narrative is the message that discipleship was about more than simply being in the presence of Messiah and thus reaping the reward of God's divine grace because of proximity to God's divine and beloved son. Rather discipleship was about moving out from the safe haven of the faith community where one is surrounded by those who are more likely to think, act and feel alike than not.

So in the second of five lengthy discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, the writer brings together a variety of disparate sources to create a unified message that is aimed first at the original disciples of Jesus, then at the early Matthean community of faith, and finally at us all that calls for all who would claim to be disciples of Christ to not only move out from their places

of comfort but do so in a way that places one's very trust and life in the hands of none other than God alone all for the singular purpose of sharing one's faith story with anyone who might stop to listen.

This lengthy discourse does much to disabuse us all of the notion that this call to discipleship is in anyway a position of prestige and power. There is rather frank talk about the reality of a disciple's life being more filled with times of persecution, doubt and bearing one's cross than it is about prestige, power or any sort of fame and fortune. But at the end of it all come a series of assurances that are meant to focus all who claim to be followers of Christ on the fact that while what is being called for is our very lives in service to share God's story we will not ever be abandoned.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40) The underlying message in this simple statement is that as one goes out into the world sharing their faith story they do not go alone. Through the work of the Spirit that moves through us all and dwells with us always we can be assured that God's very presence as shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ will companion us all, all of the time.

And yet, even more profound and powerful than that statement is the call that comes to us right here and now by way of an ancient text directed toward those who were preparing to launch out into an unknown and often dangerous world whose purpose was to assure them that there would be those who would welcome them and their story of faith. And that call is what links these two ancient texts together for us right here and now. And it is nothing less than the call to care for those who come in our midst regardless of position or power, regardless of wealth or status, regardless of condition or orientation.

You see the final two sentences in this very short passage from Matthew are aimed not at those who go out but rather at those who remain, those whose ministry and calling is to be here, those who are called upon to be prepared to welcome in the name of the risen Christ all who would come seeking to share their faith story among us. It is the call to show the very same hospitality and mercy that the prophet Micah was calling the ruling elite of Israel to show to those whom they had been oppressing. And it is because, what God asks of us all is that we honor God through how we honor each other but more importantly through how we honor those who come into our midst with a story to tell and a faith to share.

Friends all that God asks of us is that we care for one another. Whether the other is one whom we have known for years and years, or whether the other is one whom we are yet to encounter all that God asks is that we remember that the other, like ourselves, is a precious and loved member of God's family who has a story to tell, a faith to share and a desire to be welcomed and accepted. Amen.

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