

IN GOD'S COURT

January 30, 2005 SBCC

Micah 6:1-8

A year or so ago a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania did an experiment. The basic idea was to study the way that people rationalize committing various sins, especially when people figure that no one will be hurt. So the professor recruited a group of college students. And the students were led to believe that they were participating in a consumer test for some various products. At the end of the day, when it came time to pay the students, each of them was intentionally overpaid \$2.

The first group of students was told that a big foreign company was sponsoring the test and they were handed their money by an impersonal cashier. In that group, 80% of the people kept the extra money. The next group was told that the test was being run by a graduate student and was being paid for out of his own pocket. Of that group, half kept the extra \$2.

For the third group, the cashier counted out the money on her desk, and then asked each person, "Is that right?" In that way, the students had to lie in order to get the undeserved \$2. 40% of that group told the lie and took the money. In the final group, the students were told that a graduate student was paying them out of his own pocket, and the cashier asked them to confirm if the payment was right. Just 20% of those students took the extra \$2.

One of the things that study revealed was that when the students felt that they were only harming some big, impersonal far-away corporation, it was fairly easy to justify their wrongdoing. But as their victim was given more and more of a face, as their victim was made to be more personal to them, it was more likely for them to do what was right.

And to a large degree, that is what had happened with the people of Israel. They seemed to find it pretty easy to justify all of their sins, apparently figuring that God was far away, and didn't have a whole lot to do with them. And so here in this chapter in Micah, what we have is God filing a lawsuit against the people. This is a common literary device in the Old Testament. Basically God says: "You people don't think that I'm affected by what you're doing, by your sin? Well, I am affected. After all that I've done for you, and you repay me like this! Let the mountains be the jury. They've been around. They've seen the truth of what has taken place. Let them decide. Am I in the wrong?"

The way that God speaks here is a lot like how a hurt parent speaks. Like a parent who says to their child: "What have I done? Where did I go wrong with you? Tell me!"

And so God proceeds to present his opening arguments in the case. And what God says is: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, am I at fault? Have I let the people of Israel down? Allow me to remind you of the facts."

And God goes on to review some of the major ways that he has been there for the people across the centuries. How God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt to freedom. How God gave them leaders like Moses and Aaron and Miriam to guide them through the desert. How when enemies, like King Balak, tried to bring a curse on the people, God turned that curse into a blessing. And how at last, when the people came in sight of the Promised Land, God parted the waters of the Jordan River, so that the people could cross over.

But, God points out, even though God did all of that for the people, even though God showed his love for the people time and time again, they still turned away from him, like it wasn't enough.

Let me ask you a question – at least those of you who are parents. When any of your children were young, did you ever have the experience of excitedly buying them birthday or Christmas presents which you were sure they would love, and then, after they had opened them they turn to you and say “Is that all?” That's how God felt. He had done so much for them, but now it was like the people were turning to God and saying: "Well, yeah. But what have you done for me lately?"

After God presents his opening statement in this case, the time comes for the people to respond. At least they're smart enough to realize that they don't have a case, they don't have a defense. And so they try to strike some kind of deal with God, a plea-bargain.

And in effect the people say: "OK, God. What's it going to take to make you happy and get us off the hook? Do you want us to pray some extra long prayers? Do you want us to memorize some chapters out of the Bible? Do you want us to go to church every week for a year? Do you want us to give you more money? Just tell us. What is it that you want us to do?"

You see, that's the way we often think. We look on our relationship with God as a bunch of rules that God wants us to follow. Because for the most part, we like it when clear-cut rules are given to us. For instance, that largely explains the popularity of such books as the best-seller, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." The idea is that if you follow those seven habits then you will become a highly effective person. Or there are the various 12-step programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous. The idea there is that if you follow the 12 steps, the 12 rules if you will, that they give you, then you can overcome the problem that you have.

And that was the way that the people were thinking in Micah's day. They were thinking, "God, just tell us what you want us to do to make things right with you, and we'll do it." But the thing was that all of the things that they offered to do were good religious things to do, but they overlooked what God really wanted from the people.

It's like the story about a little fish that got washed up onto shore and was left flopping around in the sand. And so some people figured that they would help the fish. One person ran and got the fish a nice chair to sit on. Another person brought a beach umbrella to provide some shade.

Someone else brought the fish some nice, cool lemonade to drink. But to their surprise, even after they had done all those things for the fish, the fish was still miserable. The fish was miserable, of course, because the people had done all kinds of good things for him, but they hadn't done the most important thing. That is, they hadn't put him back in the water.

I was talking with Father Gus, the replacement for Father Wayne over at St. Michaels. We were talking about confession and Fr. Gus says it never fails to amaze him that when people come to him to confess, let's say they confess they haven't honored their father and mother, then Fr. Gus tells them to go and say three Hail Marys' and three "Lord's Prayers" they are very happy. But if he says "Go and apologize to your father and mother, they won't do it. They'll do the religious things, but not the real work of mending relationships.

And so here in Micah, as the people ramble on about all the good things that they're willing to do for God, God has to stop them and remind them what's most important. And God starts off by announcing that what he's about to tell them is not something new. No, what God wants from the people is what God's been telling them he wants all along.

And so the question is, Are we willing to remember what God has already said? One of the popular movies a couple years ago was "The Prince Of Egypt." It's basically an animated version of the story about the Moses and the Exodus. But in that movie, one of the themes that gets emphasized is whether Moses is willing to remember who he really is. Because in the movie, Moses finds it rather tempting to forget about his Hebrew past, and instead to believe the lie about himself, that he is the true Prince of Egypt. After all, if he believes the lie, he can live a life of power and wealth and prestige. But if he remembers and accepts the truth about himself, he'll end up with a life of suffering and sorrow.

And really that's the same message we heard in the reading from the New Testament today, the section called the Beatitudes. Because there we are told that if we listen to the truth, if we listen to God, and follow God like Moses did, we too may expect to be persecuted and hated and slandered. But the Beatitudes end by saying that if that happens, Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great least in terms of your relationship with God.

Here in Micah, God lays out in very basic terms what God wants from us: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. The Christian life has often been compared to a journey. And on that journey, God may lead us through some times and places that are not so pleasant. Those times, like it says in the Beatitudes, when we may be persecuted, hated, and slandered. But during those times, the challenge is for us not to be overwhelmed by where we are at the moment, but to remember where it is that God is taking us.

When God takes us to court, God knows we're guilty. God knows that we don't have a case to defend ourselves. But just before the judge's gavel comes down and we're sent off to the punishment that we deserve, God gets up from the prosecutor's table, and takes us by hand. And God invites us to take a walk with him - to take a journey to where we belong.