

January 29, 2023
"In a Nutshell"
Micah 6:1-8 / Matthew 5:1-12
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

You may or may not be familiar with the name Ernie Chambers. I was not before this week.

Born and raised in Omaha, he was and still is a civil and human rights activist in his home state of Nebraska – a champion, among other things, of racial and LGBTQ justice, and criminal justice reform. He was a longtime politician who served in the Nebraska State Legislature for 46 years, forced by term limits to retire two years ago.

That run makes him the longest-serving state senator in Nebraska history – and for most of his career he was the only non-white senator. He was the first African American to run for U.S. Senate in Nebraska history, and is the only African American to have run for governor in Nebraska.

For years he was also the only openly atheist member of any state legislature in the United States.

Among the many stands he made through his career, in 2007, he challenged an attempt within the state legislature to ban frivolous lawsuits – arguing, in principle, that access to the court system should not be restricted to anyone.

To make his point, he famously filed a lawsuit against God, claiming that God caused “widespread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of the Earth’s inhabitants.”

The Westboro Baptist Church – you know, the notoriously hostile anti-gay church based in Nebraska – filed an amicus brief arguing that Chambers had no legal standing to sue God. AND for good measure, argued that he was “fully deserving of the outpourings of God’s fierce wrath.”

I’d be an atheist, too, if I believed that anything that Westboro Baptist Church claims about God was true. It’s not.

The lawsuit was ultimately dismissed in 2008 because – get this – the summons notifying God of the suit could not be delivered since God had no known address. True story. Look it up!

Chambers nonetheless maintained a tongue-in-cheek argument that God must have been notified given God's presumed omniscience, but opted not to pursue the case further. He had made his point. I don't know what happened with the legislation.

There have been, apparently, other real-life suits filed against God. Maybe you already knew this? I did not. From my quick bit of research this week, for example, I learned that in 1969, a lawyer in Arizona sued God on behalf of his secretary – seeking \$100,000 in damages for God's negligence in allowing a lightning bolt to strike her house. God failed to turn up in court, and they actually won the case.

I like to imagine a second bolt of lightning striking her house. Or maybe just the lawyer.

You are likely more familiar with fictional lawsuits filed against God – trials featuring God, and even Jesus, as defendants. Perhaps most famously in Elie Wiesel's classic play, *The Trial of God* – inspired by his experience as a teenager witnessing three fellow Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz who put God on trial, in absentia, for abandoning the Jewish people during the Holocaust.

In contrast this morning, from the prophet Micah, it is not God but God's people who are on trial.

Picture the courtroom scene Micah describes: he's the attorney representing the plaintiff, none other than God; God's people the defendants. This is actually a common literary device used by the prophets.

Nature itself, the mountains and the hills, are the jury: "Hear what the (Holy One) says: 'Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.'"

The same mountains and hills we find in Isaiah singing God's praises, the trees of the field clapping their hands as we sang together last week, are here called to cast

judgment – witnesses to the “controversy” between God and God's people. Witnesses to the violation of covenant by God's people.

Along with Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, Micah was one of the four Hebrew prophets operating in the 8th century BCE. Unlike Isaiah, who came from aristocracy, Micah belonged to the laboring class. What we know about him is what little detail is included in this book that bears his name.

The book itself alternates between oracles of doom and salvation, and our reading this morning falls into the “doom” category, proposed judgment against the Israelites for abandoning the covenant and persisting with corruption, exploitation and injustice: “... for “the (Holy One) has a controversy with (God's) people, and (God) will contend with Israel.”

For God's part, taking the stand, the tone is bewilderment: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 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.”

Why do you keep doing this?

For the people's part, the response is a desperate plea to avoid judgment: “With what shall I come before the (Holy One), and bow down before God on high?” With burnt offerings, with sacrificial calves, with thousands of rams and rivers of oil.

“Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

The collective answer to those questions, of course, is a resounding “No!” And Micah responds as God's attorney, reminding the defendants what they ALREADY know about the covenant.

Micah sums it up rather succinctly - though the covenant itself, the Mosaic covenant, is much more involved and detailed, elaborated through a long list of commandments: “(God) has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the (Holy One) require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Those famous words function as a closing argument, and they continue to echo through the generations. A spiritual mic drop. The covenant in a nutshell.

If, IF you remember nothing else about the covenant, remember this. And live accordingly. If you forget all other details about the covenant, remember these. And live accordingly.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly.

Easier said than done, no doubt, but the standard is clear. How much clearer does it need to be?

The reading from Matthew provides additional clarity. Last week we heard Jesus' first official teaching: "Repent, for the (realm) of heaven has come near."

This week we get his first sermon, his first extended teaching – up on the mountaintop like Moses, offering what we know as the "Beatitudes" – a description of divine blessing. Blessedness. They are worth repeating.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the (realm) of heaven."

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

Blessed are the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

It's as if Jesus is saying, from the very start of his public ministry, if, IF you remember nothing else that I say from here on out, or from what I do from here on out, remember this. The essence of the renewed covenant. In a nutshell.

You are blessed, you are ALREADY blessed, when you are poor in spirit – and Luke's gospel says, when you are just poor. You are blessed, or God is on your side, as our Call to Worship proclaimed, when "you mourn and feel grief about the state of the world."

When you are meek, or in Micah's words, humble.

When you hunger and thirst for righteousness like your life depends on it. And we're not talking here about self-righteousness, holier than thou, but about right relationship. With God and neighbor and self.

You are blessed when you are merciful, or in Micah's words, when you love kindness.

When you are pure in heart, when your heart is open and soft.

When you work and advocate and organize for peace, not just wish for it.

And even when you are persecuted for doing all of the above. Or again, from our Call to Worship, when you "stand for justice and truth as the prophets did," refusing "to be quiet even when slandered, misrepresented, threatened, imprisoned or harmed."

That's it, in a nutshell. The covenant, the prophetic witness, the Gospel, the way of Jesus, the way of Love.

This is not a list, any more than Micah's summary is, of things you need to do in order to win God's favor. In order to avoid judgment. That's what burnt offerings are about, and God makes very clear that God is not interested in such offerings.

To be very clear, relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves, rooted in divine love, is NOT TRANSACTIONAL – getting something in return for doing something, though so much of Christian tradition and to-this-day theology and practice suggests otherwise.

The spiritual life, the life of faith, in covenant with God, is NOT about living a certain way, saying or doing or believing certain things, IN ORDER TO stay on God's good side. In order to be "saved." In order to avoid judgment and eternal punishment. It is not about burnt offerings!

The spiritual life, the life of faith, in covenant with God, is RELATIONAL. It is about mutual relationship. The theological construct of the Holy Trinity, whether you believe in it or not, is a reminder of the relational nature of God.

Jesus reminds us that we are ALREADY blessed, when we are in right relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves. WHEN we do these things. WHEN we live our lives

grounded in divine love, always with a humble and compassionate eye beyond ourselves toward the common good. Toward peace with justice.

We reap what we sow, individually and collectively. Peace and justice is its own reward, its own blessing. Violence and poverty is its own punishment, a cruel judgment we bring down on each other by what we prioritize as a people.

And God knows, God knows, we have a lot to answer for as a people. God knows the mountains and the hills, and the trees of the field, are literally crying out in judgment against climate change and chaos – witnesses against what we have prioritized as a people. And continue to!

Where there is no justice, there can be no peace. Micah says, in humility with God, do justice and love kindness. Love mercy.

Justice and mercy go hand in hand. Frederick Buechner writes that “Justice ... does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”

Justice and kindness, justice and mercy, go hand in hand. Their own rewards, their own poetry, for a society built on constantly seeking – and restoring when needed – right relationship. Jubilee. Rooted in divine love.

Jesus goes on in his teaching, beyond our reading this morning, to sum up the full extent of the covenant, the full extent of Mosaic commandments, in another way: “You shall love ... God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Which is to say, with your whole self.

“This,” he says, “is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these TWO commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The covenant, the commandments, the way of Jesus, the spiritual life, the life of faith, salvation, are all about RIGHT RELATIONSHIP! We are blessed when we prioritize right

relationship, pursue right relationship, practice right relationship. With God, with each other, as with ourselves.

We are blessed when we realize THAT divine truth, and when we extend ourselves and expand our worldviews in that direction, in big and small ways that lead to justice and peace as their own rewards. As their own blessings. Poetry in motion.

As William Sloan Coffin once said, "If indeed we love (God) with all our hearts, minds, and strength, we are going to have to stretch our hearts, open our minds, and strengthen our souls. ... God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God, they must be palatial."

The realm of God, the kin-dom of God, that Jesus reminds us is closer than we think, depends on our living and loving palatially. PALATIALLY!

That's it, in a nutshell. And in case you forget or lose your way, just remember the Cliff Notes:

Love God with your whole being, with everything you are and have, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

You are blessed when you are poor and poor in spirit. When you mourn. When you are meek and humble. When you live for the sake of right relationship. When you extend mercy. When your heart is pure and open and soft. When you make peace. And even when the world curses you in response.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

The prosecution rests its case.

May it be so.