CURRENT ISSUES

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Formed for the Good: Justice, Mercy and Humility

When the disruptive power of COVID became clear, my strong instinct was to care for leaders through a weekly live event, *Soul Care for Caregivers*. Then the first three volumes of *Current Issues Facing Clergy* expressed my concern about the rapidly increasing division caused by partisan political rhetoric in this election cycle. Daily I see dehumanizing hostility in families, friendships, workplaces, schools, churches and neighborhoods. The people I consult in national law enforcement and politics are deeply concerned about armed conflict in the streets of America between radicals on either end of the political spectrum. This is why much of Volumes I-III focused on the cultivation of respect, patience, staying in the room with difference, and having generosity of spirit.

But in the middle of what I have been observing and naming, I have not given equal emphasis to the important issue of race. I regret this and am seeking amendment of life, for the sake of others. Race is surely a central issue of our time. And while I am aware that there are differing views on race (racism as a problem of personal sin, relational, systemic, etc.), we are called to be people who are embedded in our actual time, making a positive difference within its specific issues (race, immigration, sexuality, economics, etc.).

Whatever biblical and theological issues we may be working though, I want to help us get past fear of engagement or confusion about politically-loaded terminology to a place where we consistently give racial justice the well-considered focus it needs if we are to make a lasting difference in how our neighbors are treated in the world.

He Has Shown You

Over the last few weeks, I have been considering the question: **How might we be formed for the good?** Not surprisingly, such attentiveness took me to the classic, paradigm-shaping sentence in Micah 6:8:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
Micah 6:8[1]

Micah appears to have had a few things motivating him: a strong ache for societal justice; a critique of pietistic religion expressed in mere offerings; and a prophetic call to Israel to keep the demands of her covenant with Yahweh. Micah was dealing with a people *who would offer everything except what alone God asked for, their heart, its love and obedience…they refused to live by a faith that risks itself in doing justice.*[2] The prophet insisted that a person who does not practice mercy and justice in covenant solidarity with fellow human beings has never participated in the covenant of grace.[3] Not doing justice is not an option for followers of Jesus.

In these times of trouble, Micah's well-known thoughts give me a vision that God's people can walk, chew gum and naturally swing our arms all at the same time. An individual life can—and is indeed required—to engage in a three-part simultaneity: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. We do not need to settle for something *mere*: like mere justice without humility, or mere humility (formation) without loving mercy and doing justice.

As I sit with the text, a few lovely thoughts are forming in me, giving me a vision for one, whole life formed for justice.

First, the text stands up so as to be noticed. It calls out, "Hey, humanity!" *You have been told*. What Yahweh wants should be prominently visible and regularly practiced in the life of the community. Micah was not repudiating sacrifice. He subordinated it to ethics. He pressed for spiritual commitment evidenced by doing justice.[4]

[1] Jesus underscored the centrality of Micah's words: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others (Matthew 23:23).
[2] Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 387.
[3] Ibid., 391.

Comprehensive definition of the good comes next. It is a good that is moral and effective because it aligns with the will of God in creation. And this good is knowable and livable. Next, three actions manifest the good God intended in his elect, covenant people:

Do Justice: Justice is to sort out what belongs to who and to give it back, thus delivering the oppressed from their oppression.[5] It means to return to those who have had things stolen from them: life, freedom, agency and power. Justice calls for restoring identity, peace and quiet, dignity, security, etc. It is a reordering of reality such that victims of injustice are made whole again in a dynamic, transformative manner.

To act in these ways, we must seek, with God's help, the reformation of our hearts away from fear; consumerism; insecurity; and instinctual, unfair, angry judgments. Many of us will be summoned to courage, to acknowledge that which we have purposely or inadvertently ignored.

Love Kindness (mercy; Yahweh's covenantal love): *Yahweh's covenant love was tender, but tenacious; fierce and intensely determined.*[6] This is the posture given us for social engagement. We can assume, given the circumstances of late 2020, that the pain of individuals and communities is ever-present. This is especially so for people of color and the poor. It very much helps to recognize that everyone is carrying a heavy load, that they are easily further wounded. High value for, and cooperation with, the covenant love of God produces an inner virtue of mercy/loving-kindness in us, which then spills over to acts of agape/justice.

While feelings of empathy and compassion are obviously commendable, the command here is not so much to *feel* something toward *hesed*. Rather, the command to "love hesed" is an appeal to move from indifference to engaging one's will, desires, and spiritual motivations so that they would animate mercy and justice. It implies providing or protecting space in which the good can occur. It connotes a tight connection between the affections of the heart (the inner person) and one's bodily action in the world. *Love* is a *doing* word pointing toward a respectful, faithful and generous keeping of covenant with God. Loving and doing mercy is natural when it is the overflow of cherishing God's work on the earth and treasuring the oppressed.

The vision of Isaiah summarizes agape-based justice and mercy as:

…loosening the bonds of injustice,
undoing the thongs of the yoke,
letting the oppressed go free,
breaking every yoke?
(Isaiah 58:6)

To love mercy has a characteristic of solidarity associated with it, along with the notion of neighborliness (Luke 10, *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*). This solidarity envisioned is patient, attentive, waiting, hoping.[7] But it also pursues love-based active intervention that creates real, meaningful change toward justice for those like us and those unlike us. This can be challenging when our congregations are divided about issues of race, and when we are trying to set a good pace of change for those who are just entering the race conversation. To discern the way forward, we need to keep the whole of humanity in view: one person's slow pace is an agony for the one oppressed. The one drowning is in a *hurry* to find rescue.

Walk Humbly: Walking points to one's whole manner of being in the world—the way one carries herself or himself, and one's mode or style of living. Learning to walk with God and learning to do it with humility is core to both the process of, and goal of, spiritual transformation into Christlikeness. It is the bent of the heart that underlies practices of

[4] Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets,* Vol. 2, 733
[5] Walter Brueggemann, *Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly,* 5. And Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets,* Vol. 2, 734.
[6] Brueggemann, *Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly,* 39.
[7] Ibid., 15.

mercy and justice. A simple example, from a white point of view, is that walking humbly with God helps to set aside saviorism and fragility that cannot hear warranted criticism.

Doing justice and mercy with humility means we move from acts of leadership or service that are *power over*, to a self-emptying *presence with*.[8] It means we are intentionally conscious of the fact that those whom we seek to deliver from injustice are never objects, but are subjects with dignity, agency, wills and purposes of their own.

Walking humbly (wisely and thoughtfully) with the Author of the Covenant is the source of one's ability to love mercy and to do justice. This is where formation, kingdom and justice come together in sweet harmony in one holistic life. This is true religion. I seek such a life.

Doing Justice to Justice

Justice is first a biblical issue. We are commanded to work toward justice (Isaiah 61:8: *For I, the Lord, love justice)*. We cannot let it be owned, shaped, or have its outcomes defined by partisan politics. But neither should political quarreling shut us down. Given the reality of our situation, what manner of being, what sort of person best does justice to justice? After all, worldly approaches to justice can themselves be unjust: brute force, coercion, manipulation, abuse of power, etc. In contrast, the great Christian masters on justice agree that godly ends must employ godly means. On Micah's terms, this means that in order to do justice to justice we need to simultaneously love mercy and walk humbly.

On Jesus' terms, we need to love our neighbors and our enemies and practice the Golden Rule. In the Pauline vision of ethics for the people of God, we are to seek justice in ways that *let our gentleness* (considerateness, reasonableness, moderation) *be known to all* (Philippians 4:5). We do justice best as we invite the Spirit to work his fruit in us: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness* (Galatians 5:22). Paul's vision was that the Church would execute on its call to do justice *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:2,3).

[8] Brueggemann, *Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly,* 58.

And yet…the lesson that is deepening in me is this: The proper heart-ethic *within* must be accompanied by action *without*. As James puts it: *Faith without works is dead* (James 2:26). Paul insists that *we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life* (Ephesians 2:10).

All this to say: in order to do justice to justice we must simultaneously *do* justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Let Us Pray…

To complete the discussions of spiritual transformation and justice in *Current Issues Facing Clergy* Vols. I-IV, let us join together by praying this Collect, having especially in mind freedom for the oppressed:

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness,
no strength known but the strength of love:
So mightily spread abroad your Spirit,
that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace;
to whom be dominion and glory, now and forever.
Amen.