

## I. Advanced Organizer

- I. **Ask any teacher or parent of more than one child under the age of 8 or so, and I bet I can tell you three words they hear a lot in their household. “It’s not fair.”** As a mom of three, I’ve heard a lot of this through the years. And it’s, frankly, one of the most frustrating part of parenting multiple kids - trying to sort out what’s fair; trying to be the referee that makes sure each kid gets treated fairly. They have a keen eye for this. **Sesame Street** lays out the problem pretty well, I think. **(show video - 1:40).**
- II. Turns out studies have been done the world over, and it’s not just 2 headed monsters or my kids that cry foul if someone else gets “more milk”. In fact, a study was recently undertaken by a team of psychologists testing almost 900 children seven different countries around the world - **the U.S., Canada, India, Mexico, Peru, Senegal, and Uganda** - and in each case kids were given candy and paired with someone who either had more or less than them. If kids could both agree to accept the candy that was given to them, even if it was not equal, they could keep the candy. What do you think happened? The pair of researchers found that **all the kids were prepared to sacrifice their candy to stop their peers from getting more than them.** It didn’t matter where they came from or how they were raised, they all had the same response. Researcher Katherine McAuliffe described it this way: **“This is something that’s foundationally human and might be even more deeply rooted in our history as primates.”** Apparently when it comes to making sure we get what we think should be coming to us, we can get downright primal.
- III. We’re in the **midst of a teaching series currently considering beauty, awe, and wonder**, how we can cultivate more of that in our lives, and how Jesus centered-faith might inform that process. And I think we can all acknowledge that **this part of life, this struggle to sort out what’s fair, what’s just, what equality looks like, often doesn’t reveal the most beautiful sides of ourselves.** Because it isn’t just kids squabbling over candy, or monsters over milk, is it? You don’t have to be a fan of Bernie Sanders to know that **income equality in our country is at a record high.** So is the **mass incarceration level in our country**, disproportionately affecting communities of color. I love living in the Bay Area, a place that culturally has a high value on issues of equality, but we have to acknowledge that even here, with a cultural ethic that ostensibly wants to value the worth of others and fight for the needs of the marginalized; **we’ve got real issues.** We’ve got a **housing crisis** we can’t seem to get handle on, making it increasingly difficult for working or middle class families to live sustainably in the Bay Area. There’s no app we’ve developed to fix that. We’ve got issues of **human trafficking**: Oakland is one of the nationwide hubs for the abduction and trafficking of young people. **Even here in the Bay, despite our best efforts, we’ve got plenty of blind spots.** Alicia Garza is a labor organizer in Oakland. She’s also the woman who initially coined the term “Black Lives Matter” on Twitter, and she’s been an important voice in that movement. But she described in an article in the New Yorker last month her frustration with community work, here in the Bay Area. **“San Francisco broke my heart over and over. White progressives would actually argue with us about their right to determine what was best for communities they never had to live in.”**

- IV. **So how might Jesus centered faith speak into this tension?** To some of us, that might feel like a loaded question, especially if we're paying attention to the news, we can feel like a lot of the rhetoric coming out from people who claim to love and worship Jesus doesn't bring a lot of beauty into the conversation. Perhaps we might even feel that **people are using religion to actually harm and discriminate, or perpetrate injustice rather than furthering equality**; a troubling notion, to be sure.
- V. Well, today we're gonna try to look afresh not at what our political parties are telling us, not at what other religious organizations are telling us, not even what our criminal justice system, or our social service organizations are telling us, though all of these groups have important stakes in the conversation. Today, we're gonna try to hear clearly, **what does the God we're trying to connect with through Jesus...what does this God say about justice?** How does He think about the complexity of the issues involved? And to do this, we're going to consider what the Bible has to say, particularly a part of the Bible that talks a lot about justice issues known as the Prophets. This morning we're going to focus on one prophet in particular, named Micah.

## II. Set-up for Micah

- I. Now **prophets in the Hebrew Bible were essentially people who spoke communications from God**. They were inspired by God to give messages to others, usually, but not always, to people in the nation of Israel. All of these prophets that have books in the Hebrew Bible prophesied in the era of Israelite history in which the Nation of Israel was a divided monarchy meaning the 12 tribes of Israel who were once united into one state with one king, had now divided into two kingdoms. The kingdom in the north had 10 of the tribes and that kingdom generally went by the name of "Israel". **The southern kingdom called "Judah" had the remaining two tribes, but they also had the big jewel of the whole region: the walled city of Jerusalem**, which had been the capital and the home not only of the king's palace but also of religious life once the temple was built there by King Solomon.
- II. Now Micah was from the southern kingdom. He was around in the 8th century BC, so about 2800 years ago. He was from a **small rural town in Judah called Moresheth**, an agricultural community, but he was speaking to the religious and political power-holders in Jerusalem, the great capital of Judah.
- III. **Micah prophesied during a tumultuous time**. Assyria was the major foreign power at the time, and throughout the time that Micah was prophesying, **Assyria was attacking the Northern Kingdom**. They eventually carried many of the Israelites into exile. Those who weren't carried away were brutally extinguished altogether.
- IV. **But if you were living in Jerusalem during the 8th century, you might have felt like things for you were actually ok**. You were in the City of Yahweh. You were his people. You had walls around you, an army at your disposal, and the God of the universe on your side. Provisions were good in Jerusalem, prosperity seemed to abound. Sure, **it was too bad for those Isaraelites. But you know, they were kinda straying from the faith anyway...** But here in Jerusalem, there was blessing. Judah was favored, and Jerusalem was the crown of Judah.

- V. **But some of the rural areas, like the city Micah called home, were not so fortunate.** They were the collateral damage, destroyed by the menacing Assyrian army, as it ravaged the land; not protected by Judah's forces that their own tax money had paid for. **And this is the context in which Micah speaks to the people of power in Jerusalem.**
- VI. Now I'll warn you before we read what Micah has to say, that **some of his words can be pretty harsh.** Biblical scholars have a name for the kind of prophet Micah is. **They call them "prophets of doom".** Micah is a prophet of doom because **God has sent him to deliver a difficult word to Judah with the hopes that Judah will turn from its sin and repent, averting the dire consequences that will await them if they don't.** The main passage we're going to look at today is a climatic moment in his words to Judah. We'll start by taking a look at the text and then as we dig into it more, we'll explore together how Micah got there, what his words to his audience might have meant, and how they are relevant to us.

III. We'll pick things up with **Micah, chapter 6, starting with vs. 1.**

***Listen to what the Lord says:***

***"Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;  
let the hills hear what you have to say.***

***2 "Hear, you mountains, the Lord's accusation;  
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.***

***For the Lord has a case against his people;  
he is lodging a charge against Israel.***

***3 "My people, what have I done to you?  
How have I burdened you? Answer me.***

***4 I brought you up out of Egypt  
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.***

***I sent Moses to lead you,  
also Aaron and Miriam.***

***5 My people, remember  
what Balak king of Moab plotted  
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.***

***Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord."***

***6 With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow down before the exalted God?***

***Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?***

***7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?***

***Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?***

***8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?***

***To act justly and to love mercy***

**and to walk humbly with your God.**

**A. What's happening here?**

1. Micah is **poetically creating a scenario in which God is taking his people, Israel, to court.** He's in a court of law and the God of Israel, Yahweh, is pleading his case before the jury. The mountains and hills are the jurors. God is the accuser and Israel is the accused. And we have a few different voices that we hear throughout this passage.
2. After the set up, **Yahweh opens with a question, "What have I done to you? How have I burdened you?"** And you hear in Yahweh's voice a **sense of irony.** You get the sense that Yahweh is implying, "clearly I must have done something horrible, the way you have been treating me." And then He describes his treatment of Israel. And rather than being horrible, **it's all miraculous abundant provision.** God reminds Judah how He delivered them with signs and wonder, plagues and the parting of a sea from slavery in Egypt. He talks about how he supernaturally caused their enemies to bless them, and how he once again parted the waters as they crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. **So God is reminding Israel how much he's given them, how much he's graciously provided for them, how He is the reason they are in this land in the first place.**
3. **It's kind of like that thing that happens between teenage children and their parents.** You know, when you're a teenager and you're self defining and you're going at it with your mom and dad, and you're pointing out all the reasons that their rules and expectations of you don't make sense for you, that they don't really get you, that all they've done is make your life hard, and mom turns around and says, **"Oh, right. I've been so cruel. I went through 30 hours of labor for you. I carried you in my body and then I gave birth to you and for 18 years I've fed you, I've clothed you, I've put a roof over your head. You're right. That is so horrible."** And the teenager sighs and grumbles, "ugh. She got me. She had to pull out the *labor* card."
4. **So how does Judah respond to Yahweh at this point?** Israel doesn't say, "yeah, but then you really screwed up and left me in the dust" because it's not true. Israel is guilty, Israel has sinned. **So they bring out the plea bargaining.** The response is something like, "OK Yahweh...I see you're kinda mad. You're right - we probably owe you something. So...what's it gonna take, boss? You want some cows? You want some rams? How about thousands of rams? Maybe oil? Rivers of Oil? You know what - we will give you whatever you want, we will even give our firstborn son to you if you need it. Just tell us what you need." Generous, right? What are they doing here? **They are trying to make an economic exchange. God's mad; ok, how can I appease him. How can I pay God off?**
5. But what is Micah's response? What does he know that the mountains, if they could think, must be thinking? **"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God."**
6. Now of course the implication here is that these are things that Israel should have been doing, but wasn't. This is why Yahweh is bringing them to court. So the question is,

where exactly were they going wrong, and what was Micah trying to call the people of God back to? Let's take a look briefly at each of these.

**IV. To Act Justly or "To Do Justice"** and this is at the heart of Micah's prophetic critique of Judah's leadership. **He finds them to be unjust.** So what does that mean? **What does "justice" mean to God?**

- A. **Walter Brueggemann** is a well-known Biblical scholar, who specializes in the Hebrew Bible. He summarizes the way that the Bible thinks about justice in this way. In the Bible, he believes **"Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them."** To sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them. This of course implies that **there is an order to how things are supposed to be distributed. That certain things actually belong to certain people.** So what is God's framework for that?
- B. **To understand this we have to think back in Israel's history. Back to the era Yahweh was describing in the courtroom.** God brought this race of people, the Hebrews, out of slavery in Egypt, and in the desert, at Mount Sinai on the way to the promised land, he gave them the Law. And the Law was a code to live by, to show that they were different than the rival nations around them. They were people who were in a covenant relationship with God. **He would be their God, they would be his people. They would be bound to one another like a marriage,** and he would bring them into the promised land where they would live by this law, and with his presence in their midst, be a holy nation.
- C. And **part of what Yahweh establishes in his law is a counter-cultural relationship to material possessions.** It's seen in a number of places. **Yahweh desires his people to be different than the people around fighting over stuff;** fighting for power. Look at the 10 Commandments. The tenth commandment Yahweh gave his people was "Do not covet." **Exodus 20:17 reads, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."** It's as if he knew that the desire for what others have is dangerous stuff. It has to be resisted.
- D. What the 10 Commandments lay the groundwork for is put into action in a systematic way later in the law, through the establishment of something called the **Year of Jubilee.** The Year of Jubilee was a time of Biblical Justice being put into practice. **God intended it to be a time where things are returned to the people they belonged to.** The way it worked was that when Israel got to the promised land, God allotted a parcel of land to each of the 12 tribes of Israel. But inevitably, some managed it better than others, some faced pressures with foreign trade, some might have had less resources on the land, a particularly dry or rainy season had to sell their land and so on. And so debts were incurred, sometimes people had to sell their land or themselves or their children into slavery to pay them.

**But at Year 50, every 50 years, came the year of Jubilee. All the debts were immediately forgiven.** Clans returned to their tribal plots of land and were given back their family's property. **Generations were not destined to poverty or prosperity because of the circumstances they happened to be born into.** The ground was made level again, and God reminded everyone that none of this was theirs to grasp in the

first place. He had given them the land in the first place, and it was his to take back and to give again. It was his to redistribute. It was his way of assuring they would not be like Egypt. **It was Yahweh's way of saying I have delivered you from slavery. I have made you free and I want you to be truly free.** All of you who are my people. And so every 50 years everything will be redistributed and everyone will have what they need. And I back it all up. I'll bless your crops. I'll make sure you're provided for. I guarantee all the loans. What a system, huh?

E. **The problem Micah has with Judah is that they haven't been living Jubilee in practice or in spirit for a very long time.** They had conveniently forgotten, or perhaps theologically justified themselves. Perhaps the religious leaders of the day, in concert with the kings and courtiers, the army generals and other power holders had found a way to get around Jubilee as no longer relevant. And instead of an ethos of jubilee, Micah describes what he sees in Judah in the following way in chapter 2:

**"2 Woe to those who plan iniquity,  
to those who plot evil on their beds!**

**At morning's light they carry it out  
because it is in their power to do it.**

**2 They covet fields and seize them,  
and houses, and take them.**

**They defraud people of their homes,  
they rob them of their inheritance...."**

In the next chapter he gets even more biting in his language:

**"Listen, you leaders of Jacob,  
you rulers of Israel.**

**Should you not embrace justice,**

**2 you who hate good and love evil;  
who tear the skin from my people  
and the flesh from their bones;**

**3 who eat my people's flesh,  
strip off their skin  
and break their bones in pieces;**

**who chop them up like meat for the pan,  
like flesh for the pot?"**

(He's describing cannibalism. He's saying it's as if you're eating your own people. Going on a few verses later...)

**"As for the prophets**

**who lead my people astray,  
they proclaim 'peace'**

**if they have something to eat,  
but prepare to wage war against anyone  
who refuses to feed them."**

F. I told you it was harsh. **What Micah sees from the rural areas of Judah is so far from the spirit of Jubilee that he is disgusted.** The graphic language here is not just metaphoric. **Micah saw his hometown burn.** The Assyrians were known for their savagery. He likely saw people he knew and loved massacred in brutal ways through no fault of their own, but **because of political calculations and diplomatic failures of the ones behind the protected walls of Jerusalem.** He saw the people sold into slavery for generations because of the power-hungry wealthy land-grabbers who cheated them out of their land and forced them to work it for their own sustenance. And worst of all, while the poor and powerless suffered, those in Jerusalem turned a blind eye. Their prophets told them they were great, speaking, "peace" because it was convenient for them to do so. No one wants to bite the hand that feeds them. **Anyone trying to speak truth to power, as Micah was, risked a war waged against them by the powerful who didn't want to hear it.**

G. **But God's concern is for those who do not have what belongs to them.** The poor on the margins deserve more, not because they've "earned it" any more than those in Jerusalem have. **They deserve more because Yahweh is their father, it's His to give and He wants to give it to them.** And so while the teenagers are trying to buy off their parent God with their allowance money, He's watching them let their brothers and sisters starve and He says, you just don't get it.

H. **This may have been written nearly three millennia ago, but if we're honest, does it feel that different from the issues facing today?**

V. **Love Mercy.** The second thing Micah is calling Judah to is closely connected to the first: love Mercy. have to look a little at the actual Hebrew word used here. The word is "**hesed**". It's translated **mercy** here, sometimes it's translated "**kindness**", or "**steadfast love**" but none of these is a perfect translation. Because **none of them quite communicates what an intense word hesed is.** It's a love that can only be understood in the context of a serious covenanted relationship.

A. My seminary professor - best way to translate *hesed* in his mind was "**unrelenting love**". While this word occurs a lot in the Hebrew Bible it is **generally referencing Yahweh's feelings toward His people.** He has a **persistent, unrelenting love.** It is a **passion.** It is the kind of love a parent feels for a child, a spouse feels for their partner. It is a love that recognizes that I can get angry with you, I can even discipline you, but it's because I want your best. Because I cannot stop loving you, I cannot stop pursuing you, no matter what you do, my *hesed* persists. In the Psalms, again and again psalmists like David describe the unfailing *hesed* of God, and even call upon God to remember his *hesed* for them, His unrelenting love, and move on their behalf. And Yahweh does.

B. **Hesed is us being bound together. Hesed is us honoring that we are bound.** And Yahweh here is calling his people to be a people of *hesed* - to embody *hesed* for one another in the same way that he is committed to *hesed* for all of them.

A. **Hesed is way more powerful than a live-and-let-live, everyone has a right to make their own way, I won't get in your way, if you don't get in mine, slacktivist 21st century liberal mindset.** Hesed says I have to care about you

because we are brothers and sisters. We are bound to one another. What happens to you, happens to me. *Hesed* is a kind of beauty that's striking alongside the ugliness of coveting and struggling for power.

C. I **believe Jesus is actually the ultimate beautiful embodiment of *hesed***. He was the fulfillment of covenant love: **the way that he came, the way that he lived, the way that he died**. I think he understood himself to be that, that he **perhaps came to understand his own identity by reading the prophets and their call to justice and to *hesed***.

A. In Matthew 9, Jesus was asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners. After responding that it was not the healthy that needed a doctor but the sick **he referred his followers to the prophets. He referenced Hosea, a contemporary of Micah, saying, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'".** Jesus was pointing people to go read the prophets. And if they did, they'd see that Hosea in Hebrew used *hesed* here. So Jesus was actually saying **this is why I do what I do: I desire *hesed*, not sacrifice**. Don't try to buy God off. You can't. You have to operate from *hesed*.

VI. **Walk Humbly with God**. third point reinforces the other two. **Some translate it, "walk carefully"**. Show care and reverence in this journey. **Remember who you're walking with; this is Yahweh**. He's your provider; He's given you all you have. Treat it carefully and with honor. **Don't just call upon God to be the rubber stamp on your agenda**. Don't just say "it's cool. I'm with God" and execute all your plans on your own. God's really not a fan of that.

- I. The **imagery of walking communicates a process. It's a journey**. It isn't a one time exchange, or an occasional sprint but we are called to be continually walking, slowly, steadily, humbly alongside our God day after day, one step at a time.
- II. The other interesting thing about the image of walking with God is that **it communicates that we are going somewhere**. We are walking a journey with God, but toward what kind of destination? This is where the hope comes in Micah. He can declare words of doom, and a call to repentance because **he has a picture of the way things are intended to be**. He's not knocking the only game in town without offering another solution. Listen to this very different picture Micah paints in chapter 4.

#### 4 In the last days

the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established  
as the highest of the mountains;  
it will be exalted above the hills,  
and peoples will stream to it.

2 Many nations will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.



**3 He will judge between many peoples  
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.  
They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.  
4 Everyone will sit under their own vine  
and under their own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid,  
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.**

What a picture, right? Doesn't that sound amazing? Isn't this beauty embodied? A far cry from what Israel was living, isn't it? Everyone having their own vine and fig tree. That means has their own means of providing for their household; for living sustainably. No more fighting for what's mine. And when they do it, when they live out real justice, when *hesed* is truly embodied, it's an attractive thing. Israel doesn't need to conquer anyone. They can put down their swords and show another way. A way that draws people to it; that invites them from all kinds of places to come and enter the community of *hesed*.

So bringing us forward from the time of Micah, nearly 3000 years ago, to today, what do we do with Micah's call to beautiful justice? Does Micah have anything to say to us? How can we do justice and love mercy? How can we restore jubilee in our world? I mean, **we don't live in Israel; we live in the 21st century United States. Forget Obamacare, try getting Congress to pass the "Jubilee Act"!**

Perhaps we should look to Jesus again for inspiration. In another demonstration of Jesus' dependence on the prophets to explain his identity and purpose, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah as he reads in the synagogue,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Friends, **what do you think the "year of the Lord's favor" was?** It was the Year of Jubilee! Jesus is saying, "It's here! We're doing it. Now. This is fulfilled today in your hearing. Yes the Romans are still in power. They may still think they're in charge, but I am here to subversively spread jubilee everywhere I go. And I'm telling those who are with me to follow my lead, to turn the other cheek, to give your shirt to the one who takes your coat, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned for what you do for the least of these, you do for me. I am here to spread the *hesed* of Yahweh. Who's coming with me?"

Jesus did not believe in a justice that was only for the end of the story. For some day in the future where everything would be made right. He understood himself to be initiating the end of the story. And this is the period we find ourselves in. The end of the story has begun. It hasn't finished,

it is long in finishing, but we are called as his people to live as witnesses to the end of the story; to the way things are meant to be. Jesus intended us not only to speak prophetically as Micah did, as Hosea did, but to LIVE prophetically, as Jesus himself did. To embody justice, mercy, and humility before God as he did, and thus to partner with him in bringing the story to completion.

The way of *hesed*, the way of Jubilee, the way of God's justice was completely counter-cultural when Micah preached it, and it was completely counter-cultural when Jesus lived it, and it's completely counter cultural today. We live in the world of "phone upgrades" and instagram-mable #nofilter vacations. We live in a world where we are encouraged to climb the ladder of power and gain control over our own piece of the planet. We live in a world where we are told on a daily basis that we can consume our way to happiness. And then we come face to face with this God who says "No" to all of it. No coveting. No power plays. Join me in the activity of Jubilee.

In the last few years the Catholic church has been shocked again and again by Pope Francis. And I think the reason he shocks people is he actually lives out Jubilee. He's declined living in the Apostolic Palace and resides in a modest 2 bedroom apartment instead. He's chosen a Ford Focus for his car rather than the papal Mercedes. He washes the feet of prison inmates. He sneaks out of the Vatican to give away sandwiches to the homeless.

And just as Micah's picture demonstrates, this kind of *hesed* in action is attractive. Pope Francis has been wooing Catholics back to the church with his counter-cultural moves and garnering respect and admiration from people of all faiths. And other Catholic leaders are personally convicted to follow suit. A year or so after Francis become pope, the Atlanta Archbishop of the church apologized for setting aside 2 million of a \$15 million dollar gift and building a new home for himself. In the Archbishop's words, "I failed to consider the impact on the families throughout the Archdiocese who, though struggling to pay their mortgages, utilities, tuition and other bills, faithfully respond year after year to my pleas to assist with funding our ministries and services."

So what are we called to do? How do we live out some Jubilee? I'm going to give you just a few quick tips before we close:

**1. First, we need to give God permission to speak to us about our blind spots.** Like the Archbishop, we need to allow our consciences to be pricked, and then consider if there's action that must be taken. This may mean educating ourselves about the social issues in our communities and around the world, so that we have space for God to speak to us, to open our eyes where we're blind, and to invite us into some way of participating in his Jubilee work. It may mean committing to prayer and discernment as we walk the process humbly with him, inviting his invitations to justice.

**2. Number two, we need to be willing to give up what we feel entitled to, to surrender our narrow view of what's "fair", and to open our eyes to see some of Yahweh's perspective.** This may means surrendering our comfort, our traditions, at times perhaps even our theology as we listen to and integrate the voices of the marginalized. We need to ask for Jesus' help, grace, and forgiveness for the covetousness in our hearts, and stand in the grace to experience with contentment His good provision - his bit of land, his vine, His fig tree for each of us.

**3. Some of us have been committed to justice work for a long time, but have been discouraged. We need to receive Jesus encouragement and empowerment by his Spirit to continue, as well as a sense of his partnership and leadership in what we're doing.**

(The band and communion attendants can come up)