

## “HE HAS SHOWN YOU WHAT IS GOOD”

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 24, 2017

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

The prophet Micah defined the “good” person in clear and simple terms.

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

The word the prophet uses is *tov*—the same word that is used throughout Genesis 1 when it says God looked at each aspect of creation and “saw that it was good.”

What does it mean, to do justice and love mercy? Justice and mercy often get tangled up in each other. Lots of people claim to be great fans of justice, but stumble on the commandment to be merciful. They don’t want to forgive, because to forgive someone means letting them “get away with it.” For example, if a murderer gets pardoned, mercy for the perpetrator denies justice to the victim.

And some people are all over mercy, but being so carried away with it that they have trouble organizing a business, for example. (I have a friend whose business went bankrupt because he couldn’t bring himself to insist on justice, to get what he was due. Bless his heart.)

How do you satisfy Micah’s demand for justice and mercy?

Jesus gives an interesting case study in which one person demonstrates both justice and mercy. He comes off well. But we also see how this disturbs some people. The resolution of the story would have bothered the Pharisees, since they were big on a certain form of rightness or justice. They were trying to keep the standards up, while they felt Jesus was letting down the side by being all sympathetic all the time. With the worst sorts of people.

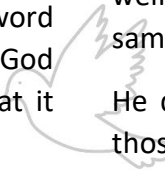
Jesus told a story.

A landowner hired a lot of workers one day. He agreed on a fair contract with the first ones to go to work. Then he hired others, who worked various fractions of a day, and promised to be fair to them as well. But at the end of the day, he paid them all the same!

He did justice; and he defended his just actions to those who protested his action: “Friends, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”

Yet he also showed mercy. People who had stood around idle all day also needed to buy groceries, so the landowner paid them “the usual daily wage” as well. And he defended his mercy toward them by telling the grumblers “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Both just and merciful. The landowner pulled it off! He did justice, and he loved mercy—must have loved it, since he asserts that he was doing what he wanted to do!

Micah does not say we should love justice but mercy. We are just because that is the right way to be. But we love to break out of that and follow our hearts, which love people, in doing what meets the neighbor’s need. We  mercy! To “do justice and love mercy” is the rule—not to “love justice and do mercy.” And he’s not talking about you as the recipient, insisting that you want justice and you want mercy. He’s talking about how you treat the neighbor. Micah is interpreting the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. The love “which does no wrong to the neighbor” does no wrong

precisely because it is nimble, exercising justice and loving mercy. If you need a yardstick, use the way you desire for others to be fair to you and to show mercy to you.

Do Justice, and love mercy. Micah 6:8.

Jesus' parable thus shows us what is good—to do justice and love mercy.

But the parable offers even more! Jesus not only shows us what is good; he shows us who is good, namely God.

We might think that if we do the first two things we are automatically walking with God. But is that so? Seems like the people who do justice and love mercy are the good people who walk with God, and the people who don't do those two things are not walking with God. "To do justice and love mercy" sounds like criteria for deciding who is walking with God.

But that's a problem. Because, if our walking with God depends on our righteousness, we have no reason to walk humbly with God. We should be proud instead, because we behave like God! We are a credit to God!

But that's why this parable is so helpful. Because the workers who work really hard in this parable, who bear the heat and burden of the day, do not walk humbly with God. Any more than the Pharisees did. And because of that, they had the nerve to insist on more than they had agreed upon. Because they were better than the other workers!

So who is good, if not those of us who are doing our best to imitate God?

The parable says it is God who is good, and God alone. Because in this parable, and in real life, you and I are all like workers who give God only a fraction of the love and praise and honor and obedience he deserves from us, as our loving Creator. We receive everything we have from God,

and then some. Therefore, for us God is always the "good" one, and not we ourselves.

Who is good? God.

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?"

Like the prophecy of Micah, this parable is not just about setting a high bar for our behavior. It is about having a relationship with God which is based on God's goodness, not our own. "Walk humbly with your God." And that goodness-towards-us is made abundantly clear to us in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. He did not come to extract a pound of flesh from us, the pound of flesh to which God is entitled by virtue of his gifts towards us. He came to give his whole body as a sacrifice for our sake, totally exemplifying love of God and the neighbor.

At the end of the day—as in the parable—it is God who is good to us. We do not "get our due," we receive in full the gifts of God for the people of God. Because the good pleasure of God, as defined in our articles of faith, is not to force people be holy, but to make us holy through the forgiveness of our sins. We come late in the day after standing idle in the marketplace, yet we are paid as though we had been working since sunup.

So much of what is wrong in the world comes out of envy. Human happiness is a comparative thing, and the basis for comparison is the people around us. We want an edge, and the desire for that edge is the root of all sorts of evil.

What a delightful and useful parable, which shows us what is good by lifting up a better standard for the good life than the self-centered rule of getting what we want, namely, to do justice and love mercy. And simultaneously shows us that in our Lord Jesus Christ we see the very heart of God towards us, a heart full of mercy.

Amen.