

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 18, 2017

For Those Who Point the Finger

Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 23:23-28

You may have heard the old curse, supposedly a Chinese curse,
“May you live in interesting times.”

The curse masquerades as a blessing,
but it clearly implies that 'uninteresting times' of peace and tranquillity
make for better living than interesting ones,
which usually include conflict and disorder and even chaos.

The saying was popular in Britain in the 1930's,
and was used in a speech by British Prime Minister Joseph Chamberlain.

Certainly, for Europe, the 1930s were interesting times.

The saying was quoted again in 1966 in a speech by Robert Kennedy.

For those who lived through the 1960's (and remember the experience)
they were nothing if not ...interesting times.¹

And it appears we may be living under this curse in 2017,
for there is no shortage of unrest, disorder, violence, and just general drama
here in the United States and around the world.

Bombings, shootings, voting, meddling, leaking, testifying, tweeting,
and 24/7 news reporting
keep things more than interesting.

The days of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah,
in the 8th century BCE, in the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah,
leading up the fall of Samaria
the capital of the Northern Kingdom,
were surely also interesting times.

For the past three weeks, in our Adult Education Summer Series,
we've been listening to these Minor Prophets
as they have lamented the troubles and disorder of their times.
They have cried out passionately against injustice and idolatry,
making the bold claim that the words they uttered
are not just the angry and exasperated commentary of a world observer,
but the very words of God.

Prophets are prophets in part because they find the courage to speak truth to power;
They see injustice and they point it out.
They see God's people worshiping all sorts of idols, and they point it out.
They see a religious system
that gets co-opted to cover the sins of the powerful
without actually holding the powerful accountable to the higher power of God,
and the prophets point it out.

Prophets point the finger and cry “Injustice! Idolatry! Hypocrisy!”

They speak poetry that evokes strong emotion from their hearers.

They see a catastrophe coming for the land and the people they love
and they do not hesitate to assign blame.

In the case of the prophet Micah, he blames Israel’s leadership.

All of it: political, economic, and religious leadership.

He points the finger at

*the heads of the house of Jacob
and the rulers of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice and pervert all equity...*

because

they build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong

and

their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

Is it not for you to know justice?—

You who hate the good and love the evil,

Who tear the skin from off my people,

And their flesh from off their bones;

Who eat the flesh of My people

And flay their skin from off them.

His accusations are stark.

They are the kind of rhetoric that have us asking for evidence,
some proof to back them up:

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe

its priests teach for a price,

its prophets give oracles for money;

yet they lean upon the Lord and say,

“Surely the Lord is with us!

No harm shall come upon us.”

But Micah prophesies otherwise, saying,

Because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field;

Jerusalem shall be come a heap of ruins...

I have to admit to being a little uneasy with this Summer Series on the Minor Prophets.

I wrestled long and hard with whether to tie my summer sermons into the series.

It is one thing to teach a class on a book of the Bible

and to look at it historically, and theologically,

and to ask the class to respond to the question of

how these words might resonate with interesting times

we are living through today.

But to preach — in my understanding —
and to begin with a biblical text,
and to carry that text forward,
that is, to go somewhere in the sermon
that carries forward the implications of the text for the people of God
into our current context.

**Simply put, the sermon in our Reformed understanding
is meant to give voice to the Word of God for today.**

The challenge is this:

Unlike the Minor Prophets,
who apparently had some other means of livelihood besides preaching,
I fit more into the category of Micah's *priests who teach for a price*
and the *prophets who give oracles for money*.

I remember first realizing this economic reality in my first church in Virginia,
living in the Manse, which of course was provided and maintained by the church,
and preaching to the same people who earlier that week
had been responsible for fixing our hot water heater.
During that time, I wrote an application essay for my Doctor of Ministry program
which I entitled, "Preaching to the Landlord!"

So there are things Micah could say in his day and in his circumstance
the likes of which I could never say from this pulpit,
that is,
if I want to continue funding my children's college education,
which I'm sure they would appreciate!

But there is more to my unease than self-preservation
or my own precarious economic reality.

There is the matter of the impact of our rhetoric on the fabric of society.

This week we have been living with the news of James Hodgkinson
who on Wednesday opened fire on the Republican congressional baseball team
while they practiced for their annual game to raise funds for charity.
Hodgkinson's violent atrocity, apparently, had been fueled by strong rhetoric,
flagrant words he'd been reading on social media
advocating the destruction of his political opponents.

Words he took literally.

This man clearly viewed "the opposition party"
as those who

*hate the good and love the evil,
Who tear the skin from off my people,
And their flesh from off their bones;
Who eat the flesh of My people
And flay their skin from off them...*

and he went from reading words on a screen
to putting bullets in a gun.

This is what we call radicalization.

Radicalization is born of rhetoric.

That is to say, Our words matter.

How we talk to each other matters.

When we look at our nation's leaders in Washington,
it's easy to be disgusted,
easy to point the finger at how awful the politicians are,
and yet...

...they represent us.

That is, they are reflections of clashing interest groups across the country;
they are a mirror of our divisions,
and our intransigence,
our unwillingness to listen to an opposing view.

And while there has been an effort at coming together around this tragedy,
and shows of unity,
like the Democratic team presenting the trophy to the Republican team
to be given to the wounded congressman Steve Scalise,
the criticism is true
that members of congress don't know each other anymore,
and don't talk to each other anymore,
like they used to.

But the old cliché applies,

that when we point the finger,

we have three fingers pointing back at us.

Our leaders are not unlike us.

They really do represent us.

And we all too easily demonize those who hold different views.

In our polarized nation,
we view the other party "one-dimensional,
driven by the worst possible motivations."

But when we look at people in this way,
we lose the ability to speak to one another
and to treat each other as human beings.²

Mental violence can lead to verbal violence
which eventually may lead
to physical violence.

We might want to say that Jesus is our antidote to prophetic finger-pointing,
but it's not that easy.

At least not if we read Matthew 23,
in which Jesus accosts the Pharisees, saying,

*Woe to you...hypocrites...blind guides...
...inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence...
...you are like whitewashed tombs,
which on the outside look beautiful,
but inside they are full of the bones of the dead
and of all kinds of filth.
So you also on the outside look righteous to others,
but inside
you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

Wow! Talk about polarizing rhetoric! Talk about demonizing language!
Except that Jesus didn't proceed to unload an assault rifle on his opponents.

Rather, Jesus explicitly denies the use of violence as a means of achieving his ends
in the Garden of Gethsemane
when he commands his disciples... to put away his sword.
And Jesus goes willingly to his death
at the hands of his political, economic, and religious opponents.
Jesus is the ultimate antidote to hate.

But this is not as far from Micah as we might think.
Micah himself provides an antidote for his own demonizing rhetoric.
While he lashes out in anger and exasperation against the leaders of Israel,
Micah maintains self-awareness.
He know his connection to his brothers and sisters,
and his own complicity in the sin of the whole people.

He knows that the sins of any in the community
are in some respect born by all in the community.
It is not just individuals who are sick with sin,
but the whole community.
And so, in the last verses of his prophetic oracle,
Micah includes himself, and his own party,
as being among those who need to be forgiven.

*Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?
The Lord does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
**He will again have compassion on us,
he will tread our iniquities under foot...***

Micah includes himself among those who need to be forgiven.
Micah sees that we are all in the same boat.
We are all in this together.
He understands the need for the community to pray
a *corporate* prayer of confession.
He knows that when he points the finger,
he is pointing three back at himself.

Micah knows that as a finger-pointer,
he is under an even greater responsibility
to do what God requires,
*to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with his God.*

So I close, briefly, with this well-loved biblical phrase,
to walk humbly with God.

Walter Brueggemann points out that this is not an invitation to meekness.
If walking humbly with God were about keeping silent,
then Micah would be the chief of all hypocrites.
To walk humbly with God means to walk “carefully” or “circumspectly,”³
to walk with
“a readiness to submit one’s self willingly
to God’s purpose for the world.”⁴

Micah calls us to live by the covenant God has established with God’s people.
The covenant established upon the two tablets of stone,
which command us to love God
and to love our neighbor.

To walk humbly with God
is to love God and to love our neighbors...
...not to shoot them...
...not to seek their destruction...
...not to cut off their ear with a sword...
...not even to demonize them with our words...
...and not to hate them in our hearts...
...but to love them.

This is the covenant we profess in our baptism.
We belong to the party of justice and mercy.
We are partisans of love,
who point the finger finally not at the sins of others
but at our own sin...

And in the end,
we point our finger to God,
whose faithfulness to the covenant
is our only hope
for salvation.

¹ www.phrases.org.uk/meanings

² Scott Detrow, "Republicans and Democrats Come Together to Play Ball," aired on NPR's Morning Edition, June 16, 2017.

³ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 192

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Hosea, Amos, and Micah: Three Important Minor Prophets" (www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com, 2013) 2