

Micah 6

Hear what the Lord is saying:

Arise, lay out the lawsuit before the mountains;

let the hills hear your voice!

2 Hear, mountains, the lawsuit of the Lord!

Hear, eternal foundations of the earth!

The Lord has a lawsuit against his people;

with Israel he will argue.

3 “My people, what did I ever do to you?

How have I wearied you? Answer me!

4 I brought you up out of the land of Egypt;

I redeemed you from the house of slavery.

I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you.

5 My people, remember what Moab’s King Balak had planned,

and how Balaam, Beor’s son, answered him!

Remember everything[a] from Shittim to Gilgal,

that you might learn to recognize the righteous acts of the Lord!”

6 With what should I approach the Lord

and bow down before God on high?

Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings,

with year-old calves?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with many torrents of oil?

Should I give my oldest child for my crime;

the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?

8 He has told you, human one, what is good and

what the Lord requires from you:

to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

Psalms 15

Who can live in your tent, Lord?

Who can dwell on your holy mountain?

2 The person who

lives free of blame,

does what is right,

and speaks the truth sincerely;

3 who does no damage with their talk,

does no harm to a friend,

doesn’t insult a neighbor;

4 someone who despises

those who act wickedly,

but who honors those

who honor the Lord;

someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts;
5 someone who doesn't lend money with interest,
who won't accept a bribe against any innocent person.
Whoever does these things will never stumble.

1 Corinthians 1

18 The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. 19 It is written in scripture: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.[a] 20 Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? 21 In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. 22 Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. 24 But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. 25 This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

26 Look at your situation when you were called, brothers and sisters! By ordinary human standards not many were wise, not many were powerful, not many were from the upper class. 27 But God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. 28 And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing. 29 So no human being can brag in God's presence. 30 It is because of God that you are in Christ Jesus. He became wisdom from God for us. This means that he made us righteous and holy, and he delivered us. 31 This is consistent with what was written: The one who brags should brag in the Lord!

Matthew 5

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. 2 He taught them, saying:

3 "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

4 "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

5 "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

6 "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

7 "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

8 "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

9 "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

10 "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

11 "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false

things about you, all because of me. 12 Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

You know how the Mississippi becomes a roaring river, don't you? A number of other streams and tributaries fill it up with their life. That great waterway of American folklore starts as a small trickle flowing out of Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota. You wouldn't imagine its depth would cut into the bedrock, that its natural width would span over two miles at the widest point. But as other bodies of water flow together, the Mississippi grows to the point where 18 million people rely on its fresh, abundant waters.

Our faith, too, arises as a number of tributaries converge with one another. Though the direction of our faith clearly funnels toward God's Kingdom, the contributing streams of thought and action help to fill that river with life, for that is a river that makes glad to the city of God.

A number of streams converge today that deserve our attention just in our readings today. What in the world does not charging interest, the foolishness of preaching, and blessing to the hopeless have to do with one another? They all feed the stream that is our faith. But, as we know, once you get further down the Mississippi, you can't tell which water molecules came from the Ohio River and which ones came from a recent rainfall. In the Mississippi, the waters commingle, they completely intermesh, becoming one body of water.

Perhaps we should just consider these different things on their own terms. So let's start with the easiest of the options. Why, do you think, does the Bible repeatedly speak against charging interest on loans? What's that all about? Our economic system is built upon lending money at interest. Credit cards have high rates, of course, though the highest are found among the predatory lenders who operate payday loan places, where actual percentage rates are

nearly 400%! Even the realities of mortgages and school loans stay with us for much too long, even though the percentages remain in the single digits. It seems that interest is a more constant reality than the purchases we make.

Perhaps that precisely the reason God condemns the practices. Lending money with interests doesn't just create an obligation of one person to another. It creates a type of ownership, an inherently unequal society, where those that control the capital control the populace. Lending money at interest enslaves those with little to those with much. And that's just completely contrary to the Gospel.

The antithetical nature of our faith says what? Those who are hopeless now have reason to be happy, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. There's literally not enough money in this world to buy what God's given to the people on the margins of society. The Kingdom of God is the pearl of great price, a price so great that no one can pay it. Fortunately, it's not for sale. God gives the Kingdom to those who are hopeless and grieve, to the humble and meek, to the ones who offer mercy, to the ones who make peace. The Kingdom of Heaven is a place where interest is worthless because there's no money in the first place. The Kingdom of Heaven levels the playing field by eradicating money, that thing that so often causes hopelessness among us.

"Happy are people who are hopeless, because the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs."
Happy are people who are hopeless. That's how the Common English Bible translation phrases this text. We might be more familiar with, "blessed are the poor in spirit," but I think this translation gets much deeper into the heart of who Jesus is addressing. When the crushing weight of interest weighs down on families who just want to eat, the Kingdom of Heaven promises a future not just where their bellies will be full, but where the oppression of debt won't define so much of their lives. The source of happiness for the hopeless is God's Kingdom

because, instead of the world's exploitation, there they find God's Sabbath rest. What we see and hear in the Beattitudes from Matthew and the prophetic call of Micah is what Father Pedro Arrupe referred to as God's preferential "option for the poor." Later teaching of the church expands this to include not just economic poverty, but all kinds of poverty to which Scripture speaks. In short, this means that God's got a particular type of restoration in mind for those who've lived in deep poverty, who've been denied the love of their parents, who've been oppressed because of their skin color or gender or who they love. God's got a preferential option for them. If you're facing one of these, know this: God's not abandoned you, for indeed, God's turning the world on it's head for you.

So where does that leave us, the majority of whom aren't facing these kinds of poverty? Some decry that this just isn't fair because God's grace is supposed to be equal. I'll never forget when one parishioner was singing the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise to God, and when it came to the part that said, "you've filled the hungry with wonderful things and sent the rich away empty," they declared this to be "terrible theology." We who are privileged want so badly to retain our privilege that, at times, we refuse to see the wonderful activity of God's grace. The rich are sent away empty because they're already able to feed themselves. This isn't terrible theology. It's God's intent to bring the Kingdom of God's true equality to this place. God's not ignoring the rich. God's attending to the more pressing needs of the poor.

So, again, where does that leave us who are, at least relatively speaking, rich? Whether in money, or in relationship, or in opportunity, we've got an undeniable wealth. Rather than lament God's attention to others, God's called us to work with God to attend to those needs. In Paul's words, God is "pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching." And no, pastors aren't the only preachers out there. And we don't only preach with our words. If we, who are privileged, speak against injustice and work to share our privilege, we help our

present world to reflect God's Kingdom all the more. We're called to become foolish, speaking and acting against the prevailing winds of our time. It seems ridiculous to critique the practices of interest that ensnare 80% of U.S. citizens in debt, but through the foolishness of our preaching, they might come to know of a kingdom where debt won't determine the rest of their lives. It seems foolish to declare to the hopeless, whose hopes have been dashed by all sorts of poverties, that there's a hope yet remaining, but if we can show them the ways that God's brought hope into our hopelessness, then they might too find the joy of God's coming kingdom. If we're foolish enough to preach with our words God's love in Jesus Christ for all creation despite the hate that we see, and foolish enough to live that love in a world seething with prejudice, pride, and paranoia, then through that foolishness God's choosing to bring salvation.

Maybe one of those things, by itself, wouldn't make such a big difference. It might seem like only the tiniest trickle. But as these things flow together, the current of God's baptismal river will pull us on into the future, ever toward God's Kingdom. Do justice. Embrace faithful love. Walk humbly with God. That's the river in which we swim, the baptismal waters that washed over each of our heads and declared us a part of God's Kingdom. From the specifics of oppressive debt to the rituals of preaching to the promise of hope to all who feel hopeless, that is the river that makes glad the City of God. Let's swim in that river all the way into eternity. Amen.