

Sermon (1/29/17, Micah 6: 1-8):

It was two weeks before Christmas as I struggled to find a parking space at the County Courthouse where I had been summoned for Jury Duty. Weighing heavily on my mind were all the things I had to do before Christmas arrived. My hope was that I would spend the day in a waiting room and, then, by the end of the day, allowed to go home having satisfied my civic responsibility.

Not that I'm superstitious or anything, but that was my first mistake. I should have never entertained that thought. Three times they called us to a courtroom. Three times they did one of those Bingo number rolling cages to pick juror numbers. And three times my number was called. By the end of the day, I told one of my fellow jurors I needed to go buy a lottery ticket. Never had my number been picked so many times!

The first two times I sat in the Juror box I was let go after the lawyers asked me a number of questions. I was not offended in the least as I increasingly felt the panic of wondering how I would complete all that I needed to do.

After the second dismissal, with only a couple of hours left on the clock, I began to feel somewhat optimistic. I might actually pull this off. Again, I should have never thought that out loud! With less than an hour to go, we were again summoned to a court room and I was again selected to sit in the juror's box. This time, I made the cut. As intimidating as it was, I pleaded my case when the judge asked if it was going to be hardship for any of us.

'I'm a solo Pastor,' I begged, 'of a small church and Christmas is only days away...please, your Honor, have mercy...I'll come back another time if you want.'

The Judge looked at me sternly. Of course, I melted. 'Sorry,' He said. 'You're staying...you need to set an example for your parishioners.'

The next day I returned to discover the trial would be a law suit that might take some time. My innards quivered with anxiety. Court during the day... church work late into the night.

The trial began. When we were led into the courtroom, it was easy to sense the anxiety rise. I looked at the two parties involved. Their eyes

were cast down upon the table as they wrung their hands nervously.

To be sure, it was quite the intimidating environment. The Judge sitting at his bench, two separate tables facing the judge with the plaintiff at one with her lawyers and the defendant at the other table with her lawyers, two police officers, with guns in their holsters, standing off to the side, us jurors sitting side by side in our appointed area doing our best to soak in all the information that was being presented. How many times did they look at us wondering which side we were leaning towards?

To be honest, it was the first time I had ever been in a court room let alone a part of the process. I'm not sure if it's something you get used to but, for me, it left me with the hope that I'd never find myself sitting at either one of those tables.

After a few days, we were told to stay put in a jury holding area. Eventually, the Judge came in to tell us that the two parties had settled. We then met with the lawyers one of whom said they had to settle because he was afraid his client was going to collapse from anxiety. A confirmation, I guess, of just how intimidating the process was.

Today's passage has all the makings of a court room scene. God is the plaintiff and humanity is the defendant. The passage opens with the assembling of a pool of jurors. In this case, the jury would consist of all of creation. 'Plead your case before the mountains! Let the hills hear your voice! Hear the controversy of the Lord, enduring foundations of the earth!'

Already, the tension is thick. Sitting in a courtroom while God makes God's case against you, is the kind of thing nightmares are made of. The Jury pool sounds pretty threatening too. In fact, these days such a jury would most likely appear quite wounded and worn. Mountains dirty with the smog and pollutants we have filled the air with. The foundations of the earth cracked and limping from the pounding it has endured. The hills stripped of their minerals and treasure. No, this is not a jury I would want judging my case!

The lawsuit begins with God choosing to represent himself because, well, because this is God. What's interesting, though, is that God's case is not so much about proving fault as it is about expressing lament.

Humanity has broken God's heart and God has chosen a court room to get our attention. 'Why have they done this?' God wants to know. 'Why have my people rejected my love with such disdain?'

God proceeds to describe how God has cared for his people with such tender mercy and grace.

'When they cried out in Egypt, suffering from the harsh slavery the Pharaoh had inflicted upon them, I came to their rescue.' God relates.

'When King Balak of Moab devised a plan to secure the services of a Seer, Balaam, to inflict curses on Israel, I again intervened. By the time Balaam arrived, he had only blessings to shower upon Israel.' God describes.

'When the Hebrew people crossed over into the Promised Land at Gilgal,' God continues to make his case, 'I was there and I made sure my people were protected.'

'How quickly my people have forgotten me and all I have done for them!' God concludes. 'Why? I have loved them with a perfect love and they don't write, they don't call, they don't visit, they don't even text me.'

On *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor used to do this skit where he would call his mother. Usually, his Mom would lay the ole guilt trip on him quite thick, wondering why he hasn't called or visited in so long and why he doesn't seem to have time for her anymore.

"It's okay," She would then tell him. "Even though I was in labor with you for over 8 hours and my body was stretched and contorted in ways inhumane in order to give you the breath of life, it's okay." This speech was usually followed by a fair amount of weeping.

"Okay, Mom." Garrison would plead. "Tell me what you want and I'll do it."

'Objection!' The defendant's lawyer declares with a bit of a quiver in his voice. 'How are these past events relevant to the case?'

'Overruled!' The Judge declares.

There is much more to this scene than simple neglect and lack of familial attentiveness. God reminds humanity of a broken pattern we seem to continually repeat in our relationship with God. While God seeks to be in communion with us, we seem intent on reducing this relationship

to little more than a business transaction.

Almost to prove the point, the plea bargaining begins. Maybe it was because the defendant's lawyer realized the odds were against them. Maybe it was the intimidation factor of the courtroom. Maybe the defendant's lawyer noticed his client was about to collapse from anxiety! I don't know.

"So what does God want?" The defendant's lawyer blurts out. "What will it take to settle this and get us off the hook? Maybe burnt offerings of calves a year old?" This was the way things were settled in the Temple when one sought to balance the scales of divine justice. Year old calves were about as valuable a peace offering as one could offer.

'How about thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of oil?' Asks the lawyer. A kind of ransom that even King Solomon, in all his glory, would have found difficult to come up with.

'What will it take? What can my client offer to set things right? His firstborn son?' The lawyer says with a sarcastic chuckle as if to mock the impossible odds God has set.

It is what we tend to do when it comes to our relationship with God. It's just business, as they say, indicating it's okay to leave the heart in the drawer as we discuss the terms of the deal. What will it take, God, to live assured of your favor, to get our wishes answered, our hopes satisfied, and our fears of divine retribution assuaged? What will it take? A thousand rams? Tens of thousands rivers of oil? Regular attendance at worship? A big donation on Christmas Eve? Extra points for good behavior? What will it take?

How disappointed we tend to end up. Try as we might to reduce our relationship with the Almighty to such shallow depths, it is a place God refuses swim in. As with all relationships, communion with the Holy is complex, immeasurable, and mysterious.

The court room settles into silence. The moment of truth has arrived. All of creation leans forward to hear God's response.

God slowly stands. It's easy to tell the question alone has taken its toll. There is a sense of defeat in God's body. His eyes fill with tears. God speaks but not in deafening tones of accusation as before but with

wearied tones of sadness.

‘I have told you so many times,’ God declares.

‘Do justice’ –seek the good I have shown you, care for the vulnerable (think about that in today’s context), work hard to make sure systems are just and fair and that the heart is always part and parcel of the deal.’

‘Love kindness’ -make sure the covenants you make with one another and with me count for something. Be loyal, steadfast, determined, and faithful until it hurts. Words matter, promises matter, they shouldn’t be taken lightly. Love kindness. Don’t just ‘do kindness’ but ‘love kindness’...find the joy that comes with true covenant keeping with me and with my Beloved.

‘Walk humbly with God’ - Live as though there is the possibility you might be wrong. Live as though there is always something new to be learned. Live as though my love for you and your love for me is an ongoing adventure filled with surprises and untold possibilities.’

It’s interesting how high we regard such declarations as ‘He or she stood up for what they believed in’. It seems that God wants something more...for us to stand up for what God believes in. To do such requires something significantly more than just self-determination. It requires trust. It requires a depth of love that takes a life time of communion; a life time of hearing and receiving the invitation to, ‘Take, eat, this is my body broken for you.’

The plaintiff, God, returns to his seat. There is nothing more that can be said. The Jurors are clearly moved – the mountains quiver with awe, the hills bow before their maker, and the very foundations of the earth whisper ‘Alleluia’.

All eyes turn to the defendant. What, O mortal, will you do?  
To God alone be all the glory!

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

*People: And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, as we bow our heads before you we reluctantly accept that we have been rightly accused. Our love for you is often shallow, reducing it to a simple give and take to get what we want and/or a means by which we affirm our biases. As a result, our relationship with you always feels lacking. We wonder where you are when we are hurting. We think you have forgotten us when the heavens fall silent. Our hearts hurt in the recesses of our loneliness. We cry out, O Lord, what is it that you require?

This time, O Lord, in this time of prayerful searching, help us to listen. May your call to do justice seep into places where it can't be ignored even when it hurts. May your call to love kindness, not just do kindness, be a mandate that becomes a part of our DNA. May your call to walk humbly define our days even as our lives are increasingly defined by your healing grace. This we ask of you, O God. This we hope we will be able to fervently seek even when we leave this place. This we pray will become more to us than words that are easily dismissed and forgotten. This we seek even as we seek the love you ache to give us.

Gracious God, we pray this day for the vulnerable, the frightened, and the ones who lack the opportunity to experience the joys we take for granted. We pray for your creation, called to pass judgement on us, even as we have neglected our vocation to be good stewards. We pray for the ill, the lonely, the discarded, and the ones we find it difficult to love. We pray for family and communions of loved ones who sustain us and enrich us. We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now boldly name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All:** *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*