

## What does God Require of Us? Micah 6: 1-8

### Written Text for Sermon at Emmanuel College

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“I hope you find that which gives life a deep meaning for you. Something worth living for—maybe even worth dying for. Something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can’t tell you what it might be—that’s for you to find, to choose, to love. I can just encourage you to start looking and support you in the search”.<sup>1</sup>

These words are from a letter written by Sister Ita Ford to her 16 year old niece, shortly before Ita was murdered in El Salvador, with two other nuns and a laywoman—four justice workers killed by a paramilitary death squad in December 1980. An American Maryknoll sister, Ita had been evangelized by the poor of Chile, and then responded to Archbishop Romero’s call to come to El Salvador to accompany “the hurting, the homeless and the hungry.”<sup>2</sup> She became deeply conscious of the “political implications of feeding the hungry” in the repression of an ‘undeclared civil war’.<sup>3</sup> She also became aware of her government’s complicity. She said in another letter “if we have a preferential option for the poor as well as a commitment for justice as a basis for the coming of the Kingdom, we’re going to have to take sides in Salvador - correction - we have.”<sup>4</sup>

Sister Ita discerned what God required of her. Not to intentionally sacrifice herself—the moral wrong of her murder clearly falls on the shoulders of her perpetrators—but to walk humbly with an aching people, no matter the cost. What God required of her could not be translated into obligation, but rather to passion. Her capacity to care, to respond to others’ pain was stirred. Her hope in others’ dreams was ignited. It is that sense of passion she seeks for her niece: “something to live for, maybe even die for.” Ita Ford’s life was testimony to Micah’s prophetic challenge.

What does God require of us? Micah 6:8 both poses and answers this question in a clear and compelling manner. Some have called it a summary of the 8th century prophets<sup>5</sup>, a crystallizing of their key messages into a witness that is both succinct and profound: “do justice, love

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<sup>1</sup> Ford, Ita as quoted at <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/index.php/history/72-fordsrita>

<sup>2</sup> <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/index.php/history/72-fordsrita>

<sup>3</sup> <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/index.php/history/72-fordsrita>

<sup>4</sup> Ford, Ita as quoted at <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/index.php/history/72-fordsrita>

<sup>5</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph, *A History of Prophecy in Israel (Revised and Enlarged)* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 97.

kindness and walk humbly with your God.” It strikes me the writer of Micah would have ‘rocked’ the Twitterverse. Micah 6:8 is only 9 characters over the twitter limit (with no short cuts). And yet there is a sense, even in the brevity, that it is all we need to know.

In my life the dilemma is not in comprehending this text. I think I understand it all too well. The dilemma is in it sinking into my pores, burying itself in my heart, flowing through my blood—embodying it, not as obligation but as passion, stirred from “energizing memories” and inspired by “radical hopes.”<sup>6</sup>

Micah’s chapter 6 begins with Yahweh’s frustration and sorrow at the amnesia of the people. Verse 3 says “what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?” Yahweh appeals to their intergenerational memory: “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam”(6:4)—a memory of justice that, in another time of struggle, could help generate passion and hope. The peoples’ response is kind of shamed hyperbole: what do you want from us, for our sins, for these sins of forgetting—calves, rams, oil, our first born—is that what you want, our sacrifice (6:6-7).

For Micah, Yahweh’s answer is an unequivocal NO: I want your justice, your kindness, your accompaniment, in humility (6:8). I told you what is good, you know what is good, or perhaps you have been given what is good (the Hebrew word for good used here is the same as is used to describe creation in Genesis), I want your passion, your love, your hope.

Blenkinsopp suggests that we could read this economically—the prophet, himself a person of the land, taking issue with “the economic burden that the sacrificial system represented for the agrarian class.”<sup>7</sup> It is clearly at one level a repudiation of animal, even human sacrifice. But if you put this text with others, it does not just condemn, it invites.

I would connect this text directly to Isaiah 58:6: “is this not the fast that God requires to loose the fetters of injustice.” In both texts, the prophet repudiates ritual action—offerings or fasting—in favour of a ritual of justice. Doing justice is true worship. This conflation between liturgy and justice explodes the false divisions between ‘faith and worship’ and ‘justice and peace’ that continue in our churches today. Justice is at the heart of faithfulness, the doing of justice is as a prayer. What makes us whole what makes us holy is when justice and holiness are as one breath.

Yahweh’s invitation continues. To do justice and to love *hesed* is to love in response to God’s love.<sup>8</sup> The memory of God’s justice, the lived experience of God’s love, is to stir our hearts to

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *A Prophetic Imagination (2nd Edition)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Blenkinsopp, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Laberge, Léo, “Micah,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968 and 1990), 254.

respond in love to those around us. Here false divisions between love and justice are also disrupted. God's justice originates from God's love. Our justice must also be intertwined with our love. Cornel West says it well: "justice is what love looks like in public."<sup>9</sup>

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly—a sense of accompaniment of God, by God, of others. For the prophet, all can intersect in a response to God—a passion continuous with memory and generative of hope.

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives takes its mandate straight from this page of our sacred text. Our identity statement says we are to be a "faithful ecumenical response" to Micah 6:8.<sup>10</sup> Our role is to challenge, invite, inspire and equip our churches to respond together to this prophetic call. We strive to ignite their/our passion—in hopes that together we could be more like movements of radical hope than monuments constrained by the privileges of empire.

KAIROS came together in 2001 from eleven small inter-church justice coalitions who themselves began to emerge 40 years ago, in about 1973. Each coalition came out of a *kairos* moment, a time where the injustice was of such clarity that action was essential: to do justice was what was required.

One example was after the 1973 coup in Chile...Desperately worried about human rights advocates whose lives were now in danger, Canadian Christians joined together to press the Canadian government for generous refugee policies, urging Foreign Affairs to delegitimize the military junta. Out of this *kairos* moment came the Inter-Church Committee on Chile. And because refugee advocacy was needed as urgently in other places, the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees was born. As Sister Ita's eyes were opened to other struggles, so also were the eyes of these ecumenical activists and the Inter-Church Committee on Chile became the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America expressing solidarity with victims of Central America's escalating wars (including that of El Salvador). Liturgies of love and justice.

The coalitions were imperfect assertions of hope by passionate troublemakers who prayed social action into our world. It wasn't always easy. There were defeats and setbacks. But there was also perseverance and there were some victories. Some moments when justice began to flow down like water, like the end of apartheid or debt cancellation. These memories remind us that even when change seems impossible, you must keep working, loving, because it can change, it will, it must. We are a resurrection people, who believe in the impossible.

Today, when we ask what God requires of us as an ecumenical movement, the groans of God's wounded creation meld with the cries of battered people. The situation of Indigenous

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<sup>9</sup> Cornel West as quoted at <http://www.catholicchapterhouse.com/blog/2011/03/04/love-in-public-justice-or-mercy/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.kairoscanada.org/who-we-are/about-kairos/>

communities—in Canada and around the globe—is the strongest call. Here the context is one of failure, betrayal, and a hoped for contrition, a heart that breaks for the way the settler church violated Indigenous peoples and God in distorted mission. For settler Christians, participating in acts of Indigenous justice can be prayers of confession, of repentance, a witness stronger than words.

But it is also a context of gracious welcome and startling hope, an unbelievable invitation by Indigenous peoples to try again in right relationship. We are being called to walk with Indigenous communities, not to work *for* or even be in solidarity with *them*, but to walk *with* Indigenous people who give leadership from the heart of our movement and who bring vision to hopes for a reconciled future.

Bishop Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, has helped me to see how, in the context insatiable resource extraction and limitless growth, Indigenous communities living in deep relationship with creation are prophetic. Their lives call settlers, churches, our country, and our globe to a respect for earth's limits in a way that is both critique and invitation. They know what is good—God's beautiful creation—and remind the rest of us of what is required: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. Do we have ears to hear these prophets in our time?

One of those prophets for me is Miguel. The context of his prophecy was casual enough. We were having dinner in South Korea, in a hot pot restaurant. I was privileged to sit with members of the emerging global ecumenical Indigenous network. I felt honoured to be with them as they gathered over food to strategize on how best to use the rest of the World Council of Churches Assembly to ensure support for Indigenous rights struggles. Nearing the end of our time, Miguel caught my eye, and through a translator he said: "Do you know that the mining companies so affecting us in Latin America are Canadian?"

Miguel is an Indigenous leader from Guatemala, also an Anglican priest. I was relieved by his gentleness, but convicted by his question.

Do you know? I heard so much in that phrase: do you know about our waters polluted, do you know about our communities displaced, do you know about the repression, when standing up against the mine can mean your life? Do you know the history...the doctrine of discovery, colonization, our will to recover and maintain our life in harmony with the earth? Do you know yourself? The current face of Canada overseas is now much more mining than human rights or peace-keeping.

Do you know what is good, what is required? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

I don't remember how I answered. I do remember that I will never forget the question, never. It was a prophetic—a bit of a call to account, for my own complicity, my citizenship, my pension fund. But maybe more important it was an invitation that sunk into my pores and buried itself into my heart, igniting a passion that will fuel my own commitments to mining justice.

At KAIROS we try to help our churches make room for prophets, be stirred up in love by the dreams of others, accompany in humility, and respond not from obligation, but in passion, our collective justice a common prayer. Our work is partial, imperfect, we make mistakes, we lose our fire. But through our churches working together, with the help of incredible faithful folks across the country, and by hope of partners in Canada and around the globe, we keep trying.

On our website is information about a mining justice campaign called “Open for Justice.”<sup>11</sup> This is one way that we as Canadian churches are responding together to Miguel and to Micah. There is lots else there too, about the Indigenous rights work to which we are committed—truth and reconciliation, decolonization education, the protection of Indigenous rights in resource struggles, equity for Indigenous children. We are reconsidering the sacredness of place as a matter of watershed discipleship. There is much to do...together.

Sometimes justice work, with its necessary engagement of systems and structures, gets more than a little uncomfortable. Like in biblical times, prophetic witness can challenge what Brueggemann calls “royal consciousness”, disturbing imperial power and rattling the privileges of those of us who experience its benefits.<sup>12</sup>

Striving to recover *hesed* or fidelity with Indigenous communities long betrayed may bring us in to difficult places with the powers that be, what Ita Ford called “taking sides.” What will we do as church when Indigenous brothers and sisters in BC put their bodies in the way of the Northern Gateway pipeline? What do we do when Indigenous peoples in Guatemala and the Philippines expose Canadian mining violations? What can we do, when our vision and commitments to ecological integrity and human rights appear to contrast with policies of a ruling government?

We believe in speaking in the public square, speaking up for those who might be harmed by choices we have made as a country. Witnessing to the harm done to God's creation. Sometimes that speaking out is branded with the dismissive word “political.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: “When people say that religion and politics don't mix, I ask them what Bible they are reading.”<sup>13</sup> We are not talking about being partisan. We are talking about reflecting on issues that touch our own lives and those of others made in the image of God. We

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kairoscanada.org/sustainability/resource-extraction/open-for-justice/>

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu as quoted at <http://trystanowainhughes.wordpress.com/tag/desmond-tutu/>

are talking about policy development, dialogue with corporations and governments, making constructive proposals, calling ourselves and others to account, changing ideas and habits, public displays of concern and support—witnessing to the gospel by engaging in the public sphere. I wouldn't call this politics. I call it faith.

I strive to always remember that public witness is a far greater risk for many of our partners than it is for ourselves. We work with people who, in incredible courage, step into the roles of colleagues and friends that have been murdered for their work of justice and peace. If they can stand up, in such great risk, than I, we, must find our own courage to stand up for what we believe, what is deep in our hearts, what our faith says God requires.

At KAIROS, perhaps our most important work resembles Sister Ita's letter to her niece, Jennifer--the multi-generational, inter-cultural work of stirring up the passion for justice in ourselves and our communities. In her wisdom, Ita acknowledges that one can never know what will ignite the passion for justice in another: "I can't tell you what it might be...I can just encourage you to start looking and support you in the search".

Our task in faithful community is to continually invite one another into that lifelong search--to provide encouragement, resources, support, and challenge. As churches, places of "energizing memories" and "radical hopes,"<sup>14</sup> we can share our own commitments and failures in the struggle to be faithful. Few find a path to passionate justice without mentors or invitations, however humble, preferably humble.

We do have inspiration. Yahweh sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam (Micah 6:4). The same God sent Christ. Jesus placed himself firmly in the tradition of prophets with the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Isaiah 61 becomes Luke 4. And the parade of radical saints continues to our current day...ordinary people, rarely remembered folks, mingling with Francis of Assisi, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Viola Desmond, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Sisters Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel with Jean Donovan, Elijah Harper, Kimy Pernia. In *kairos* moments, they were stirred by love to act for the dreams of others. Their faithful justice an expression of worship as holy as prayer, their lives tangible witness to the radical hope revealed in Christ—the One who always walks with us, always. Their legacy can inspire us to passionate, faithful justice, if we but remember them. Sister Ita Ford, presenté.

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, 1.