

Sermon: In the Company of the Unraveling
Scripture: Micah and Matthew
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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Jesus and Micah do not make it very easy for us church people, I have to say. There is this strange paradox, this almost forced hypocrisy that occurs when we sit here in the institution of the church and read such passages as we read this morning which are at best not supporting the institution and at worst down right anti-institutional. As I've told you before, we pastors have this running joke about how many times we hear from folks thinking it's the first time its ever been said: "well, it's like, I'm spiritual but not religious, know what I mean?" Or the other one – "my church is on the mountain top or I worship on the ski slope." And really, I think if we are to be faithful to what we read in the gospels, I don't think we can respond as they imagine we might by saying "Oh no you don't! Where's the organ on the mountain, where is the choir, where is the Bible, huh, huh?! Where's the preacher? Is he on the mountain preaching to you, no I didn't think so! You can't be spiritual and not religious. You either come to church and be spiritual or do something else!"

One reason I've never responded that way is because we are part of an institution that is in existence because of this man named Jesus who actually didn't put too much stock in religious institutions... and that, I think, is stating it generously. At times he was downright hostile to them. Whether it was his numerous diatribes against the leaders of the religious institution or his over turning of the money changers in the temple or saying he would destroy the temple and raise it again in 3 days or the way he defined God's people not as adherents to particular religious doctrines but as those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty, or because most all his teachings and sermons were no where near a temple or synagogue but rather on the mountain-side or in a boat on the water or out in a field somewhere. And then remember the one time Peter was moved to build something to honor Jesus because of this incredible spiritual moment of his communing with Elijah and Moses? He gets scolded by God Godself: "just listen to him Peter, just listen. Don't go instituting anything please!"

And that's why I'm really not in any position to give the "I'm spiritual but not religious" people any grief. And so we are in an awkward place, we church people, thanks to Jesus, where we are trying to build and maintain and make relevant a religious institution called "the church" and all the while we are reading scriptures inside the institution that kind of unravel what it is that we are stubbornly trying to build. It's really no wonder someone sits in here on Sunday morning and comes to the conclusion that they can be spiritual and can have as fluid a notion of church as they please. I mean, I'd be hard-pressed to believe that Jesus himself would make much of an issue of it.

It's not that Jesus is bucking a particularly Jewish trend towards institutionalization by challenging and at times dismissing the institution. Don't get me wrong. Jesus is a Jewish prophet speaking out of the prophetic tradition which runs all through Judaism and its institutions as this consistent, persistent, exasperating and often threatening voice that critiques and challenges and provokes the powers that be, the institution that be, to look at itself and remember that it is in existence not for itself but for the common good and particularly the least among them. Justice, mercy, service is its life blood that too often becomes frozen and turned in on itself. That's what all the prophets were screaming about: you have forgotten and lost our whole purpose and point, you have strayed from God's commands and expectations of us! The prophet Micah was doing just this. He was saying "we have lost our way and we have allowed a few to accumulate too much wealth and property and power at the expense of others and this is not God's way! God gave us commands and laws to make sure that we are a just and equitable people and we have become lost."

Actually, I'm saying it a whole lot gentler than he does. Hear Micah's words themselves: "Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.... You people hate the good and love evil, you who tear the skin off of my people and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off of them..." and so on. You can hear why people tended not to like prophets much, our own Lord and Savior included who by the end of his life probably had more people who disliked him and wished him dead than followers who adored him. Such voices who

challenge the status quo and the people who benefit from it for the sake of the down trodden are usually not very popular people. “Blessed are you who are persecuted for my names sake,” says Jesus. “Blessed are you who are poor, who thirst and hunger for what is right.” Blessed are you, Jesus said, while the religious institution of his day was clear that it was certain others who were blessed and privileged.

Some 700 years earlier in Micah’s time the religious institution encouraged it followers to come before the Lord, to bow yourself and offer burnt offerings and calves a year old. “Will that please the Lord?” Micah has the people of Israel asking. “We know we’ve blown it, fallen off track and exploited the poor instead of caring for them. So then what does the Lord require of us? How about a thousand rams for burnt offering, with 10 thousand rivers of oil?! Shall I give my firstborn to the temple for my transgressions?!” All of these things were fundamental religious institutional practices. It would be like us praying to God saying – “OK, I have not done what is right, Forgive me and tell me what is required? Shall I come to church every Sunday? Shall I serve on multiple committees? Shall I run the pledge campaign next year? Shall I give 10% of my salary to the church?” Whether it’s giving a burnt offering or putting money in the plate, it is a question of institutional religious practice. But to these questions Micah says: “He has told you O Mortal what is good! What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God!” You hear it?

And that’s what I’m saying, it doesn’t make it easy for us church people! My salary would be much better served if Micah’s response was – “give 10% of what you make to the church budget for Will’s salary for this is what the Lord requires of you!” But there is this remarkable undermining that goes on, this unraveling of our very efforts to keep our institution afloat that comes from the very scriptures that our institution holds as sacred and central! No wonder so many of our churches are flailing around! No wonder there are people who are frustrated with the operations of the church that never quite seem as effective or efficient or smooth as secular businesses! No wonder its hard to market this thing called the church because the very thing that we are promoting is unraveling us as we promote it!

Remember a couple weeks ago I said that one of things that Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplishes is that it no longer allows us to justify and define ourselves

over and against others? Well, if there is ever one sure proof way to ensure a strong identity for any group of people it is to be clear about who you are not, who you are over and against. “Come here and not Our Lady of Mount Carmel where you have to deal with strictures and structures of Roman Catholicism, nor Shelburne Episcopal where they haven’t become Open and Affirming, nor All Souls where you can’t talk about Jesus. Come to the Charlotte Congregational Church, ‘where you’ll find everything you want and nothing you don’t!’” But in the end such a tack can’t and shouldn’t work for us because the death and resurrection of Jesus has broken into our conscience and into our institution to unravel that very human way of defining ourselves over and against others. It’s just another example of how the very thing we are doing in being church is undoing us.

BUT, you know what? I think that’s the idea! We are supposed to be “being undone”! Could it be that when we are in church, we are not in the presence of the holy and righteous, but we are in the company of the unraveled and the unraveling! That’s what you and I are a group of folks who are bring unraveled, cause that’s what the scriptures tend to do and that’s what the worship of God does, it unravels our tightly and neatly raveled order and world. So really, we are not supposed to be perfect here! We are really supposed to be flailing around in the church and knocked off our game because the game has been on human terms for too long now and Christ came to reframe the game along God’s terms and God’s game is CRAZY! What if we understood the church in this way: not, finally, as a community seeking the perfection of God and trying to make it on earth as it is in heaven, as much as a community laying itself open to be unraveled by God, willingly accepting the necessary messiness of what it looks like to have it be on earth as it is in heaven!