

**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany  
February 2, 2020 – Church of Reconciliation  
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

*The Summons*

Having raised three human beings through the teen years and into adulthood, there is a certain soft spot in my heart for the courtroom scene set before us this morning from the prophet, Micah. I distinctly remember saying aloud to each of my sons and daughter, “After all I’ve done for you????” And if the truth be told, I probably heard those words spoken by my own mother at one time or another. Sometimes out of sheer entitlement, we ask for one more something. Sometimes, we ask out of a total lack of confidence that we can turn things around ourselves. Most often, it may seem to us like a request when it’s heard more like a demand. The fact is, such a situation is a set up for tension at best and a showdown, like the one we have before us this morning at worst. This is true courtroom drama here. It’s like the best TV courtroom drama has to offer. So, let’s see what the prophet presents as Yahweh summons Israel into court to adjudicate a fractured relationship.

*Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.*

In just these opening verses, it seems that the Lord’s summons is marked by stern imperatives. “Rise, plead your case.” This is the Lord who is demanding that Israel bear testimony and give an account of their conduct. Behind this metaphor is the recognition that this *God-Chosen People* relationship is not working out as the Divine intended. And so, Israel is summoned to make a case that it has not been remiss in its obligation to God.

It is important to note that even though God invites Israel to “plead your case,” no immediate chance is given to answer. The Lord takes the stand and gives testimony. And here it is ... the words I have myself spoken, with a heavy heart, or a frustrated spirit, or an overwhelming disappointment ... “After all I’ve done for you.”

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I wearied you?”

And the tension escalates:

“Answer me!” ...

Oh, I know how those words feel as they leave my lips... As the Lord then alludes to the long history of generosity and liberation toward Israel rooted in the Exodus where the Divine’s fidelity and relentless redemption of Israel on the precipice of destruction is offered as incontrovertible evidence. The Lord’s testimony decisively indicts Israel as the failed partner in this relationship.

Finally, and we are already we are at the sixth verse when Israel dares to speak up:

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?”

A good beginning, one of humility, one could say, but then Israel gives damning testimony as the sum total of the defense is a series of questions:

“Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of ram, and ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression...?”

These questions make clear that Israel has completely misunderstood its relationship to God. These questions present Israel’s profound misunderstanding of the nature of the intimate and covenantal relationship with the Lord. Israel turns around in the Divine courtroom and presses on with questions that indicate a transactional understanding of relationship with the Lord. Israel says, let’s make a deal. You did this for us, we can do this for you, if you demand this from us. In so doing, Israel is creating a market with an exchange rate, where one acts only if something is received in return.

How interesting it is that we can trace evidence in our own family systems in which transactions define the nature of love. When the child is young we tell them, if you are good, we will stop for ice cream on the way home. As the children mature they realize that in order for them to follow directions, we offer retributions transactional in nature and now we’re stuck. We have established this “tit for tat” system of conditional love and it always gets the best of us. ***Conditional love isn’t love at all.***

This courtroom places the unconditional nature of Divine Love as the evidence that clears the Lord of any guilt. It is Israel who has failed time and time again to enter into covenantal relationship, that is, the relationship of unconditional love- love that is mutual, rooted not in commodities exchanged but love that never fails to be given on behalf of the other in need.

How is it that you and I offer love? How do we love the Lord “with all our heart, all our mind, all of spirit, loving our neighbors as ourselves? Is it a simple transactional equation (one could call it a *quid pro quo*” but we won’t... if I do this then you must do that?

Clearly, in this dramatic courtroom exchange, God does not want from Israel any of Israel’s commodities, sacrifices too bizarre and absurd to be rooted in love. No. Rather, the Lord demands nothing less than the refocus of life in unconditional covenantal possibilities, covenantal living that orients the relationship in three ways:

**Do justice:** to be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world, to work for change within the systems themselves that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others.

**Love kindness:** Here, the translation for the Hebrew, “*hesed*” is disastrously inadequate. The word “*hesed*” means to reorder one’s whole life into a wholehearted orientation of fidelity and unconditional love.

**Walk humbly with God:** To abandon all self-sufficiency, and to acknowledge in day to day, moment by moment living that all life is gift and blessing, and as such we are required to love and act with this same self-giving love.

In one commentator’s words: “God does not want what we own. God wants who we are or, at the very least, God wants the world to see whose we are,” (without explanation necessary.) Micah’s issue with the people set in this morning’s courtroom drama may well be too close for comfort these days. Offering our time, talent and treasure is necessary in order to sustain God’s mission, God’s vision of an abundant life meant for all God’s people; yet the offerings are those that come from a heart overflowing with love, with the realization that our lives are gifts and all we have is meant to be a love offering in thanksgiving for the abundant life we live so that others may also live an abundant life.

Another commentator wrote: *“The readings this week lead us on a labyrinthian journey toward a vision of the kingdom of God... a vision not only with God at its center, but God at every turn, upsetting our expectations and challenging us to take another step deeper into the mystery that is Divine love, Divine presence dwelling in our world. God is not demanding of us extravagant sacrifice or ritual purity: God is not to be sought in worldly logic or in systems of “if this... then that.” God is calling us to follow Christ, the Beloved, into the world to engage in a lifetime of faithful, creative, courageous, community-building love.”*

My friends, in God’s great economy there is no “Art of the Deal”, no transaction that epitomizes success. In God’s great economy, as envisioned in Micah, doing justice, loving mercy, compassion, and walking humbly with the Creator of all is all that matters.

Could it be that whether we consider ourselves “successful” by whatever standard we measure it, is simply not the way of life for the Christian? Could it be that whether we have the right answers or not, never matters to God?

Can we simply accept the verdict we have before us this day and take our rightful place on the side of seeking after justice, loving as wholeheartedly as we possibly can each and every moment of our lives, and walking humbly with our God?

And therefore, living alongside all that God has created, creatures and creation itself- we are called to live with a sense of deep reverence, integrity grounded in mutuality, and love that demands we **aspire** to love unconditionally. Not only is this our only hope, it is the summation of all that God demands.

Amen.