

August 8 Meditation; Katherine Penner

This summer I have been working for Dave at The Micah Mission, doing my practicum, which is part of my degree. I've had lots of opportunities to learn about how the justice system works, how community programs such as Circles of Support and Accountability operate, and about the variety of organizations all doing good work in Saskatchewan. During this I have participated in many meetings, drafted a memorandum of understanding and a terms of reference, interviewed CoSA core members, joined a CoSA circle, and have also helped MCC facilitate a peace skills course, among many other things which I can talk to you more about after the service if you're interested.

As well, I have been doing a lot of learning and reflecting on our so-called justice system and the approach we take, as a society, to responding to harm and wrongdoing. The things I have found to be most insightful from my learning and reflecting are what I want to share with you today. My 'thesis' statement -to use the academic language which has been the focus of my life for the past few years- is that everyone has value, which cannot be taken away even when we make mistakes. Nobody is disposable and as people of God I believe we should all be able to see ourselves reflected in everyone- including those who are or who have been incarcerated or have otherwise come into contact with the justice system.

I also want to try and connect these thoughts to the message of Micah 6:8, which answers the question of what God requires of us, by saying that we are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. This is also the namesake of The Micah Mission and this passage guides the work that is done there. In my understanding, Micah Mission uses this passage as a guiding framework for how the organization seeks to address harm and work for justice.

1. First is the Biblical basis for the themes I've found in restorative justice work.
 - a. When considering wrong doing, we can turn to the Bible to see our own story as people of God in times where we committed actions of harm and faced consequences. God's children have continually made mistakes and yet God still loves and values each of us, as is displayed over and over again throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, the prophets' job was to bring messages to Israel from God, calling them out on the ways they were acting unjustly, ignoring oppression and neglecting the most marginalized and vulnerable people in their communities. The prophets told the people of Israel that they needed to reform their ways to align with how God called them to behave, warning them that if they continued to be ignorant, committing harm and allowing injustice, there would be consequences. These consequences included the conquering and exile of Israel, among other hardships the group experienced. However, this message also included the fact that although there would be consequences for their

mistakes, they would still be God's beloved people, God would not turn God's back on the people, and there would be redemption and a good future would lie ahead. Micah's message clearly states, in several different places, that God will vindicate us, pardon our iniquity, pass over our transgression and also that God's anger does not last forever because of his desire to show mercy.

- b. As a person of faith, I think we can use this history, which is our history, as a way to identify with those in our correctional system, seeing that everyone has made harmful mistakes in their life and yes, one must be held accountable to them but this does not make that person unworthy of love, dignity, and a chance to have a good future ahead of them. Mistakes or wrongdoing should not need to determine the entire future of a person. As well, by viewing incarcerated people this way, in light of our Biblical history, and in identifying with them, we refrain from 'othering' these people by separating them as different from us and we also refrain from seeing them as less valuable than ourselves.
 - c. In considering this argument, I also noticed that this really seems to connect to the Golden Rule- To do unto others, how we would have them do unto ourselves. It seems to me that the Golden Rule is not merely saying to treat others the way we wish to be treated, but that we should act in this manner because we see that other people are not in fact 'other' but that they are fundamentally alike to us. I think it is speaking to the need to see each person as a human being, part of one global humanity, who are children of God. If we do not define one another as being different or of differing value, then I believe we may extend the same attitude of compassion and grace to everyone, thus removing acts of injustice from our behaviour.
2. Next, I want to acknowledge the injustice I have noticed within the justice system and which I have spent a good deal of time reflecting on.
 - a. Several themes have stood out to me as I consider the correctional system- a term which I am trying to use more often than calling it the 'justice system' as it has often been brought up that this institution more often than not is not serving justice to those who need it. The first point which I have been thinking a lot about is that we all make mistakes but many of us have had the privilege of having supports and resources to deal with the underlying causes of potentially harmful behaviour- that is many of us have had strong families or communities to keep us afloat and to root us into a place of belonging, which keeps us accountable to those around us. I consider my own life at this point and feel that very little except for chance, and the privilege of circumstance separate me from individuals who have ended up incarcerated. Furthermore, for most of us, our mistakes are forgiven and do not define our identity as a person. Few of us are

given permanent labels as a liar, bully, harsh criticizer, or tone raiser even though we might have done things we are not proud of and wish not to do again.

- b. The second theme I have been mulling over is that people in correctional facilities are some of the most marginalized people among us, and often have multiple intersecting facets of their lives that act to make them vulnerable and oftentimes oppressed. In our society, poverty has been criminalized and while we all have choices in our actions, sometime people are forced to make choices that they feel are necessary to survive each day. Homelessness is certainly a condition that nobody would choose to place themselves in, but once in that position, activities such as loitering, panhandling, or sleeping in public places can often result in criminal charges. As well, instead of being considered a health concern, addictions and substance abuse, alongside many other symptoms of mental health issues are also criminalized. Many individuals who use substances have faced and are facing traumatic events and using becomes a tool to cope with pain. Isolation and feeling alone means that person has nobody to turn to when they need help to heal, and other coping strategies are found instead. This is not even the full extent of extenuating circumstances, which are outside of a person's control and can lead to becoming incarcerated. Once incarcerated, a person is cut off from their community and lack many of the resources necessary to deal with their underlying issues, leading them to become a part of the revolving door that is the system. It should also be made clear that Indigenous individuals and communities, as well as other people of colour are disproportionately affected by these marginalizing factors and are thus overrepresented within our correctional system.
- c. One other key point that I have identified is the complexity of considering those who are incarcerated. Some people truly have caused harm and need to understand the consequences of their actions and become rehabilitated, while others have had harm done to them and as a result have been incarcerated by factors outside of their control or for reasons I don't think are just. Others may have both been harmed and caused harm. In saying this, I think my argument is that each person and their experiences are unique to them and there is a vastness within the circumstances and reasons why someone has become incarcerated. Therefore it is much too simplistic to view everyone in prison in one flat way, or to label them all as criminals without the thought of them being diverse humans, each as different as each one of us. This also leads me to hold several seemingly contradictory opinions when thinking about the correctional system. In the context of the colonization of Canada and the current issue of working towards reconciliation I think about Indigenous folks, many of whom I

don't believe should be incarcerated, as they are. Only about 16% of Saskatchewan's population identifies as Indigenous, but over 75% of those in the correctional system hold this identity. When thinking about this fact I tend to want to discuss abolishing prisons, reducing the budgets of policing and providing larger sums of funding to community programming, social services, mental health and addictions service providers, and to providing safe and affordable housing. However, I also think about the ways victims of crime are often forgotten and neglected. For those who have been harmed, the person responsible needs to be held accountable to their actions and needs to have an understanding of how to make it right. Community safety and assurance to victims that no further harm will come to them is also necessary, which does sometimes mean removing the person who caused the harm from the community for some time. The part that is missing within the system, and the issue in which Micah Mission is working towards, is how to reintegrate people who have caused harm back into community and how to give them the needed resources to be a valued and welcome member of that community. The research done on the Circles of Support and Accountability program asserts that filling this gap prevents offenders from causing any further harm, thus creating safer, more vibrant communities for all people.

- d. In my understanding, the work of Restorative Justice seeks to address each of these points, holding them in tension by putting people and their needs at the forefront of any process of responding to wrongdoing. The more I study Restorative Justice, the more I truly appreciate it's person-centered focus.
3. To tie this all together, I will turn specifically to the verse Micah 6:8 and share some insights I've gained about what message the verse is trying to convey and what it really says that God requires of us.
 - a. The verse reads that we are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. This expectation stipulates action, attitude, and the foundational belief that guides how we carry out the requirement. I would characterize this as a holistic model of how to live in our world, being in right relationship with one another, imitating God's character, and seeking a just society for genuine reasons that benefit all.
 - b. The first part of the requirement is **Doing** justice. This is an action, as Stephen G. Dempster writes in his commentary on Micah, "to do justice is often to help someone in need, that is, to be an advocate for someone whose rights are being violated." As well he notes that the word justice is frequently paired with righteousness in the Bible, coming together they mean social justice, which is displayed as modelling the divine justice of God in our own behaviour. This call

also adds to the argument of faith by works. Doing justice means one must take action and cannot fulfill this requirement by being idle. It is this message that helps motivate me to participate in the work of reconciliation, and restorative justice.

- c. The second call of Micah is to **Love** Kindness, which addresses one's attitude. Dempster writes that "this combination of verb and noun is unique in the Old Testament since one usually does kindness." Often we are told to **be** kind toward one another, which is a different type of request. To **love** kindness means to take on the attitude of enjoying or delighting in acts of kindness, which cannot be done begrudgingly, as one might when they must interact with someone whom they strongly dislike. In Dempster's apt wording "this idea of helping someone in need should occupy a central place in one's heart and affections... once does not help others simply because of a sense of duty but because of a genuine desire to help." Dempster also discusses how the word 'kindness', as it is used in this verse, was translated from the Hebrew word 'Hesed', which is a complex word that is a combination of loyalty, mercy, fidelity, and steadfast love.
- d. The final aspect of Micah's message is walking **Humbly** with God. I see this as the foundation or perspective that informs how we go about undertaking the first two points. Dempster adds that "one must walk with God in a certain manner" and that "the adverb 'humbly' can also be translated [as] 'circumspectly' and 'carefully'." To me, this means that we should try to act as God does, while acknowledging ourselves as continual learners who are imperfect. Oftentimes when we are in situations where we want to help others, we assume we know better, have the correct solution, or have some aspect of superiority to the lesser ones. The perspective of humbleness allows for us to walk alongside those we want to help, without presuming to know all the answers. This also takes away the pressure of needing to be fully equipped to solve people's problems. Instead, we can imitate to the best of our ability, God's qualities of kindness and justice and journey beside those who need us.

I'm not certain whether the thoughts I've shared today are as profound as they have seemed to me or perhaps my points are already common knowledge to some of you. They are simply reflections on the work and learning I have been doing over the past few months and how I see them fitting into my faith and beliefs. That being said, I invite you to go out into the world, considering what doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God means for your own life and the ways you interact with others, especially those who have made mistakes.

Works Cited:

Stephen G. Dempster. *Micah*. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017.