### “All Brothers” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 5, 2023

**Micah 3:6, 9–12**

6 The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them. . .

9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, 10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! 11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” 12 Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

**Matthew 23:1–12 (verse 8 in NIV)**

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they *do*, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others. . . 7 They love to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them ‘Rabbi.’ 8But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers [NIV]. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Micah is one of the most fiery prophets of the Old Testament. He was a contemporary of First Isaiah, and witnessed the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians in 700 b.c. Unlike Isaiah, Micah seems to come from the peasant population, and has a more radical message, while Isaiah worked within the system. The biblical tradition preserves for us both the radical Micah, who predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, and the more traditional Isaiah, who predicted Jerusalem would be rescued and the temple preserved. Isaiah was right in the short run; a plague, possibly the bubonic, seems to have hit the Assyrian army and stopped them from taking Jerusalem although they had overthrown over thirty other walled towns in Judah. Micah’s prophecy can be said to have been fulfilled 114 years later, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans overthrew Judah and destroyed the First Temple. The Temple was seen as an emblem of God’s favor. Micah saw it as a symbol of the ruling class’s corruption and oppression. His heart must have broken when he saw the destruction of the Judean cities, and broken again when he saw Jerusalem delivered at the last second.

Micah was a suffering prophet. No wonder, at the end of his book, he says “Woe is me! For I have become like one who, as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the vintage has been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat . . . The godly man has perished from the earth, and there is none upright among men; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts his brother with a net” (Mic 7:1–2 RSV). He sees the moral corruption in society running rampant.

In any case, you can hear the moral intensity of Micah’s message, and his anger at the capital city and its rulers. Elsewhere in the Bible we get hints that an oppressive taxation was imposed upon rural farmers, causing them to lose their land. Indeed, the big cities and the aristocratic class were taking advantage of the countryside. But Micah’s protest is not just economic and political. It is also moral. He objects to the easily bribed priests and prophets, who betray their religious mission through their greed. He also implies the judges are corrupt, when he says “Its rulers give judgment for a bribe” (3:11). People are being hurt by this corruption. Real lives are affected. Zion has been built with blood (3:10).

Jesus also speaks of wrongdoing, although in this passage he is concerned with religious wrong, where religious leaders put heavy burdens on people, but offer no help (Matt 23:4), and where they crave status and respect. Don’t be like them, he says. Don’t seek to be called “Rabbi” or “Father,” for you have one teacher and you have one Father, the one in heaven (23:8–9). In verses 8–9 you have the basis for what used to be called the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. He says “you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.” The NRSV mistranslates that last word as “students,” but “brothers” is the proper translation of *adelphoi*. Of course, it is meant to include women. “You are all brothers and sisters” would be perfectly acceptable. But “students” muffles the family metaphor being used here. In verse 9 the family image continues. You have one father, the one in heaven.

Finally he uses a non-family image, when he says “Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah” (23:10). And then he uses an image that occurs numerous times in the gospels: “The greatest among you will be your servant” (23:11).

The community of believers, then, is organized under its Messianic instructor and its heavenly Father, and it becomes like a family of brothers and sisters under the divine parentage. This passage works against the idea of exalting any human above the community, like a Father or a king. He emphasizes that we have one spiritual father and a single messianic teacher. It doesn’t mean he is advocating anarchy, but just that leaders should not aspire to grandiose titles like “Rabbi” or “Father.” Leaders should become servants. And those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

If we treat each other as brothers and sisters we will not exploit and lie to each other. We will not build our city on blood, we will not corrupt justice by taking bribes, we will not distort our religious message for payment. We won’t lie in wait for our brother, or hunt him with a net, as Micah noted.

True brotherhood involves ethical behavior. There’s a certain logic here. If God is the Father of everyone, that makes us all brothers and sisters, spiritually. If we can start thinking spiritually, we can start *acting* spiritually, too.

Who is somebody who is more or less an ordinary person, but who followed their conscience and became a powerful person? I think of Malala Yousafzai, who spoke up for women’s education in her country, Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban destroyed several schools in her province, and girl students had to take tests from their homes. Malala went on television and her efforts helped to persuade the authorities to reopen girls’ schools, but became a target for the Taliban. In 2012 she was shot by a Taliban assassin. She survived the attempt and became famous in her own country and in the world, receiving the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the Nobel Peace Prize while still a teenager. I don’t think she sought those honors. Those are the honors we seek to confer on those we deem most heroic.

Another person who came to be famous was the preacher Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and of 11 other children in that family. He went to Amherst College and became a Presbyterian minister in Indiana. He later became the pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn. His sermons were wildly popular, and he was known for using humor and slang, unusual for those days. His emphasis was always on the love of God, and he doubted the existence of hell. He began raising money to purchase the freedom of escaped slaves. He was an advocate of women’s suffrage. He stated that evolution was compatible with Christian beliefs. He had a major impact on theological discussion in America. He sought to get Christians to extend love to everyone, regardless of race or gender. He wrote “Now systems come and systems go; but the moral structure of the human mind is such that it must have religion. It must have superstition or it must have intelligent religion. . . Do you suppose that [Jesus] is offended when we exercise the purest and dearest affection in the house of God? This is the place for smiles. It is the place for happiness” (*Evolution and Religion*, 18, 20). He argued for worship arising from hope and love, and not from fear.

And so may *we* be moved by hope and love, and not either by fear or by selfish ambition. Let us act according to the highest ideals we can visualize. We have one Father, and we are all brothers and sisters. And we have one Messiah, and we follow his ways.