

Listen Up, You Cannibals

Micah 3: 1 – 4, 6: 6 – 8

July 18, 2010

I. Introduction

A. We live in a strange society, wrote newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck several years ago, where we make documentaries of serial killers, movie idols out of organized crime members, authors out of political crooks, and role models out of criminals who beat the system. ... I don't know when crime went from being news to entertainment, she said, but somehow it's made the transition.

1. That's a pretty strong indictment against the society we live in

A. But a little closer to home for some of us perhaps, are some statistics quoted by author and speaker William Willimon - and again, this was written a few years ago

1. So I don't know how accurate the numbers are by now, but he says -

a. Thirty-one percent of us who are married admit to having an extramarital affair

(1) Eighty-six percent of youth lie regularly to their parents

(a) And 75 percent lie regularly to their best friends.

b. 2,245 New Yorkers were murdered by their fellow citizens last year

2. And perhaps most disturbing - Two-thirds of those asked about religion

a. Said it plays no role in shaping their opinions about sex.

A. As someone has observed - Our nation has all but tripped the worst ratings

1. On God's Richter scale of fully deserved moral judgment.

a. And Christians often rate little better, and sometimes even worse

(1) Than those who are non-believers

A. I am struck this morning with the vivid description of violence and evil

1. Found in the prophet Micah's words from the first verses of our scripture text

A. Words that were not addressed to folks that we would normally think of as "bad people"

1. Although they are accused of some terrible atrocities

A. But Micah's message is addressed to the rulers of the house of Israel

1. The civil and religious leaders of a nation

a. Of people who considered themselves to be God's chosen

A. And Micah says to them, in effect – "Listen up, you cannibals!"

1. You, who tear the skin off my people, tear the meat from their bones and devour it

- a. You, who break apart the bones and chop up the flesh
 - (1) Like meat for a kettle of stew
- 2. Listen and hear what God has to say to you!
- A. What would you think if I, or some visiting preacher, got up some Sunday morning
 - 1. And began the message with a stern voice – “Listen up, you cannibals!”
- A. Do you suppose you would sit up and start listening more closely
 - 1. Look around to see if anyone had a carving knife and fork in their hands
- A. Bible scholars are unsure if Micah’s description of the evil in Israel
 - 1. Was meant to be taken literally – some suggest that torture and even cannibalism
 - a. May actually have taken place during this time
 - 2. When the Assyrian army was invading the Northern Kingdom of Israel
 - a. And situations throughout the land were quite desperate at times
- A. But it seems more likely that the language is a figurative description
 - 1. Of the way those who were in positions of power and influence in Israel
 - a. Were treating those who had no means of defending themselves
 - 2. The poor, the “widows and orphans” that are frequently mentioned in scripture
 - a. The foreigners and the slaves
 - (1) The lowest of the low among the levels of Jewish society
- A. Those were the people who didn’t have resources to pay for help
 - 1. Who didn’t have a voice in the political system
- A. They were the people who had no advocate to speak for them in the justice system
 - 1. If someone with wealth or authority mistreated them
 - a. There was very little that they could do about it except complain
 - (1) And nobody paid any attention to their complaints
- A. If we were to look back at the beginning of Chapter 2 of Micah’s prophecy
 - 1. We would hear a more general indictment, regarding the taking of fields and houses
 - a. With the interesting note that the people involved in such evil
 - 2. Were doing these things simply “because it was in their power to do it”
- A. In other words, ordinary people, no better or worse than you or me
 - 1. Were misusing their wealth or authority or whatever it was
 - a. That gave them the ability to take advantage of others around them
- A. I’m reminded of the story that the prophet Nathan told to King David
 - 1. About the rich man who took his poor neighbor’s only lamb to feed his guests

- a. And when David was outraged by the story and demanded that justice be done
- 2. Nathan pointed his finger at the king, and said – You are the man
- A. In that case, it was the wife of one of King David’s soldiers that he had taken
 - 1. And David had actually schemed to have the soldier killed in battle
 - a. In order to cover his affair with Bathsheba
 - (1) And make their marriage appear to be legitimate
- A. Or, we have the less well-known story of King Ahab
 - 1. Who noticed his neighbor had a beautiful vineyard, and he wanted it
- A. The neighbor wouldn’t sell the vineyard, so the queen, Jezebel
 - 1. Simply ordered him to be assassinated, and then told her husband, the king
 - a. Now go and take that vineyard that you wanted so much
- A. Those of you who are wives, this is not a good example of how to please your husband
 - 1. The story does not have a happy ending
 - a. You can read about it in 1 Kings 21 and 2 Kings 9
- A. In the NT, we find the Apostle Paul writing to the believers in Galatia
 - 1. About their new-found “freedom in Christ”
 - a. And he warns them not to misuse this freedom from the Mosaic law
 - (1) For what he calls self-indulgence
 - 2. Reminding them that the “law of love” compels us to love each other
 - a. As we would love ourselves
 - 3. And then note – that “if you bite and devour one another”
 - a. Take care that you are not consumed by one another (Gal. 5: 15)
 - (1) Listen up, you cannibals!
- A. It’s the kind of story that has been repeated over and over throughout history
 - 1. The strong take from the weak, the rich from the poor
 - a. To the point that we almost take it for granted – that’s just the way life is
- A. But God sends the prophet Micah to his people with the message –
 - 1. That’s not just the way it is!
- A. That’s wrong, and even though it may seem that nobody is noticing
 - 1. Yahweh is a God of justice, and those sins will not go unpunished
- A. Those same people who are committing such acts of violence will come to me
 - 1. When the armies of Assyria and Babylon rise up against them
 - a. And threaten their security and their comfortable lifestyle

- 2. Then they will ask for my help, my protection, God says, and I won't hear them
- A. The leaders of Israel may be proclaiming a "peace and prosperity" gospel now
 - 1. While they are robbing the poor in order to make themselves wealthy
 - a. But the day is coming when they will be put to shame and their wealth destroyed
 - (1) Along with all of Jerusalem
- A. Listen up, you cannibals, a time of judgment is coming
 - 1. And I believe the warning is just as valid for us today
- A. We may not be kings or rulers in the land
 - 1. But we are wealthy and powerful compared to many in our world
 - a. And it can be easy to assume that we deserve everything that we have
 - (1) Simply because we can have it
- A. I wonder what the prophet would say to us today.

II. Part 2

- A. We move now from our verses in Micah Ch. 3, to our text in Ch. 6
 - 1. And as we so often find in the OT books of prophecies
 - a. Following a stern warning against doing wrong
 - (1) We hear what sounds like a response from the people who heard it
- A. Recognizing their misuse of power and oppression of the poor
 - 1. The people of Israel now come before God in repentance –
 - a. What, then, does the Lord require of us?
 - 2. Another age-old question dating back to the Garden of Eden
- A. Now that we can no longer hide the fact of our sin, or our tendency to sinfulness
 - 1. Now what? What can we do to make it up to you, God?
 - a. Have you ever found yourself asking that question?
- A. The verses of our text mention several possibilities –
 - 1. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high
 - a. That sounds like a good beginning
- A. Shall I come before him with burnt offerings of the choicest calves?
 - 1. That would have been in line with the minimum requirements of the Law
 - a. Just lay it out for us, God – what is it that we need to do to please you?
 - 2. Wear the "right" clothing, don't smoke or drink or gamble – is that enough, God?
- A. Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of cattle, or ten thousand rivers of oil
 - 1. I know I've done some really awful things, God

- a. So maybe just doing the minimum requirement isn't enough
- 2. How about a really generous donation to the church?
 - a. Not that there would anything wrong with that, mind you...
- A. And I'll be in church every Sunday – well, unless there's something else important
 - 1. I'll pray before meals, even when I'm in public
 - a. I won't lie, cheat or steal, and I won't work on Sundays
 - 2. How about that, God, will that be enough to make you happy?
- A. Shall I give me firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul
 - 1. OK, God. Here's the ultimate sacrifice
 - a. If you ask...I'll go be a missionary in Africa all my life
 - 2. Or, since I'm probably too old, or too young, or not educated enough
 - a. Or, I have a family to support, so I'll let my son or daughter go instead
 - 3. And if none of that works out, God, you can be sure that I will sacrifice
 - a. Something really important – I'll put off buying the new iPhone or something
 - (1) So that I can help support someone else out on the mission field
- A. I'm being a little facetious with all that, but it's also serious stuff
 - 1. Isn't that the way we often think about pleasing God
 - a. Aren't those the kind of things that God requires of us
- A. But the prophet says – He has told you, O mortal, what is good
 - 1. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness/mercy
 - a. And to walk humbly with your God
 - 2. That's it? You mean I don't have to sacrifice the choice steer from my barn
 - a. Well, maybe I should make some sacrifice just to show I mean business
- A. But I don't have to go looking for thousands of rams or all those rivers of oil
 - 1. And I don't have to sacrifice my firstborn? Well, maybe I could encourage him/her
 - a. To commit themselves to following you with all their heart, soul and mind
- A. And if I am walking humbly with you, God, does that mean
 - 1. I'm going to need to be more careful about the way
 - a. I treat those who don't have the comfort and security that I have
- A. Does doing justice mean that I help my neighbor, across the fence
 - 1. Or across town, or halfway around the world
 - a. Just because I have more than I need, and they don't have what they need
- A. Oh, and by the way, does loving kindness mean that I should help somebody

- 1. Even if they are spending their resources on things that I consider foolish
- A. What does mercy mean when someone has stolen from me or vandalized my property
 - 1. God, what does justice look like when my “neighbor” has broken the law
 - a. Does that make a difference in how I am supposed to treat them?
- A. You know, God, maybe these requirements aren’t as simple as I thought at first
 - 1. Maybe I need to learn to know you better, so I can understand what this all means
 - a. Or maybe I just need to plead for your mercy and grace
- III. Micah seems to come out at that place in his prophecy, if you have your Bibles open
 - A. Turn to the very last verses of his Book, where we find these words –
 - 1. Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over
 - a. The transgression of the remnant of your possession
 - A. [God] does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing mercy
 - 1. He will again have compassion on us
 - a. [God] will show faithfulness to Jacob, unswerving loyalty to Abraham
 - A. And so I ask us today, spiritual descendants of Abraham and Jacob
 - 1. How can we, who have received so much undeserved mercy from God
 - a. Do anything less than to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly
 - (1) To the very best that we can, with our God
 - A. And I say to myself as well as to each one of you today –
 - 1. Listen up, you cannibals!