

## **“You Judge Men and Nations”**

**Micah 6:6-16    Luke 12:13-21**

**Scott B. Martin - August 2, 2009**

Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book a good many years ago with the intriguing title, “What Ever Became of Sin?” It was his contention that people were losing their sense of personal or corporate sinfulness. A decade or two after Menninger’s book came out another book came out with the title, “I’m Okay, You’re Okay.” The Gospel message is the exact opposite of this. It says that we are ALL sinners.

Furthermore, because we are all sinners every human institution we create, every human society, every business, every church, every, political party, every country, every family, town, and nation when standing before the judgment seat of God will inevitably be found wanting. It is the judgment of the Bible that there is no such thing as moral perfection, never has been, never will be. I am not okay. You are not okay. Everyone on the face of this planet is not okay. Every human institution is not okay. Our Statement of Faith recognizes this, saying, “God judges people and nations with a righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

There are many Christians who claim that the church should stay out of politics and economics and confine itself to individual sins, prayer, worship and applying charitable band aids to the needs of the poor and needy. Heaven forbid if the church speaks out against the political and economic system that helps create poor and needy people. Sadly much of church history would indicate that this is indeed the preferred way for churches to go.

It is true that some Scripture passages can be highlighted to justify it, but I would argue that as the Statement of Faith points out, much of the prophetic tradition in the Bible argues quite forcefully for a very different approach. This prophetic tradition, far from being superseded by the apostolic tradition in the New Testament, is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

The prophet Micah is a perfect example of this. He asks a critical question for any person of faith, **“With what shall I come before the Lord?”** (Micah 6:6a) All of the language and questions that follow are based on people going to the temple to worship God by participating in the ritual of animal sacrifice.

Thankfully this is no longer a part of a worship service for Jews or Christians, not since the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in 70 A.D. None-the-less, we and millions of Christians around the world do go to church to worship. One of the ways we do this is by putting something in the “offering plate.” The prophet Micah’s question is still a good one, “With what shall I come before the Lord?”

Now don’t get Micah wrong. There is nothing wrong with religious ritual. It can be a useful means to approach God and express one’s faith. It is good to join others in this, creating a community of faith. What Micah is saying is that ritual that is not back up by righteous living or which does not lead one to try and live a righteous life is not worth the time of day. It is a waste of time, effort and treasure. **“...what to does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”**

Here the Apostolic witness agrees. In the New Testament we find Jesus saying that it is not good enough to simply put one’s offering in

the plate. If one has a broken relationship with one's brother or sister one should seek to repair that damaged relationship and then come and put one's offering in. Real worship involves bringing our whole lives, our everyday actions to where we worship. God cannot be bought off to look the other way. God judges people and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

What is it that has the prophet Micah out preaching up a storm on the highways and byways of the city? It turns out that it is the way the shakers and movers are running the economy. Micah asks on God's behalf, **“Can I tolerate wicked scales and bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths.”** (Micah 6:11-12)

Then, along with the usual judgment that God will destroy the country by allowing invaders to conquer it, Micah utters a very interesting judgment, **“You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be a gnawing hunger within you,...”** (Micah 6:14a) When the economy is run this way there may well be material gain but ultimately they will not satisfy. These ill-gotten material gains cannot bring true life and fulfillment.

Our current economic debacle was brought on in large part by the mortgage crisis. Millions of people have lost or will lose their homes. The ripple effect has been devastating as banks tightened lending practices, factories closed and millions of jobs were lost. The mortgage crisis was brought on by ignorance, wishful thinking, and outright greed and deception. It was aided and abetted by loan officers who cared more about their commissions than the welfare of

their clients, by appraisers who knew they were overvaluing homes, by lending institutions who in their desire to have loans to sell on to others did not require loan applicants prove they could afford the loans and government that either willfully or through ignorance turned a blind eye to all of this and did not regulate these practices. God judges people and nations declared through his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

One of the greatest early economists, who is still sighted today, Adam Smith, was not just an economist. He also held a chair in “moral philosophy” from which his economics is inseparable. His famous book on economics “Wealth of Nations”, gets its name from Isaiah 61. In this prophetic passage Isaiah offers the hope that God will help his people get back to Israel, reestablish its economy and the wealth of nations shall flow into it. Of course this will only happen if Israel is faithful and offers true worship, if it does justice, loves kindness and walks humbly with God. Morality cannot be separated from economy and politics or there will be hell to pay.

Twentieth century economist John Maynard Keyes said explicitly that economics was a “moral science. He said we had to view our economy with a small “e” within the larger Economy with a “capital e.” In other words our human economies must be seen within the larger divine Economy, God’s desires for us and the universe. God judges people and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

As people of faith we are called to set our personal and national economies within the Divine Economy. This seems to be what Jesus is calling for in our passage from the Gospel of Luke. The goal is not

to accumulate more and more, especially if this is at the expense of others. The goal is not to consume more and more. The person or society who dies with the most toys does not win. The person or society with the biggest barns does not win. The person or society with the most barns stuffed to the rafters does not win. Such greed can lead people and nations to a false sense of security. Jesus says it might be tempting to say in such a situation, **“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”** (Luke 12:19)

What makes this a false sense of security is that there is a judgment. God tells the rich man in the parable, **“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And those things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”** (Luke 12:20)

The goal is lay up treasures in heaven, not on earth. An important part of this is working to create a just society here on earth. In a just society all people will share in the material blessings that the earth and human effort make possible. We are to do this in our personal decisions, which are under our direct control; but we are also to work for this through our democratic system, through the people we elect, the legislation that is enacted and the bureaucracies that carry out our government’s policies. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said, **“Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”** **“God judges people and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles. Amen.**

