

Tracy Daub  
2/2/20--University Presbyterian Church  
Micah 6:1-8; **Matthew 5:1-12**

## TAKING SIDES

To say that America is a deeply divided nation at this moment is an understatement. The impeachment hearings taking place in the Senate reveal the significant divide among American lawmakers, a divide that is also mirrored in the rest of our society. Everyone has chosen their side and there is little evidence that any one is willing to be moved from their position and opinions. And we live with the escalating tension of where this division will take us as a nation and how it will be resolved.

Taking sides is not only something we do regarding politics but also in many other realms of our lives. We take sides in family disputes and office controversies. We take sides over the sports teams we support and those we oppose. We take sides over what brands and products we will support or those we may choose to boycott for some reason.

Think about what it means to take a side. Taking sides is really about power. Taking sides is about offering our power to back a particular idea or person or cause. Offering our power might mean the power of our opinion--where we share our opinions and beliefs with those people around us or we write letters to the editor of our paper. Taking sides may mean giving our power to offer emotional support or using our power to give physical support--helping someone out, marching in a protest, or being physically present to another. Taking sides could involve using the power of our resources: our money, our time, our abilities. Taking sides involves power.

Some of ways we take sides are harmless while others can cause great harm. One of the most damaging forms of taking sides has often occurred when religious people assert that God is

on their side. Throughout history, many religions have claimed God's divine support for their cause or agenda. Sometimes these claims have been in an effort to produce peace--such as in the Civil Rights movement or in the anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa. But often, often the claim that "God is on our side" has been used for great harm: to justify the enslavement of peoples, to conquer lands occupied by others, to claim resources for one's own people, to commit genocide, to deny human rights. It is interesting that historically those claiming to have God on their side regarding a particular issue have often been those who hold most of the power already. And they use this claim of God being on their side to support their power in oppressing, stealing from, or harming others.

Understanding the historical damage done by people claiming to have God on their side, I am sensitive to the dangers found in such assertions and thus wade into this conversation about God taking sides with great caution. But I cannot escape the fact that the Bible over and over again shows that God takes sides. The Bible repeatedly reveals a God who is on the side of those who are more vulnerable and who hold less power. Whether in the preaching of the Old Testament prophets or in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, we learn from the Bible that our God is a God of justice. In the scriptures, God speaks out against injustice and holds the people of faith accountable for ensuring that justice is done. When you think about it, injustice is an issue of power--an issue of how people abuse their power in ways that harm others.

Our two scripture texts today reveal that God is not neutral when it comes to injustice. Rather, we learn that God takes sides. If you love courtroom TV dramas, then Micah is the prophet for you. The Micah passage puts us in a courtroom scene. Courtroom trials are all about trying to get people to choose a side. And that is what happens in the reading from Micah. God brings a divine lawsuit against the people for their acts of injustice toward the vulnerable and the

weak in their society. God declares: "Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice." It appears that the jurors in this case are the mountains and the hills--for these foundations of the earth are solid and dependable in rendering the truth. And God offers God's side of the situation. God recounts all the many ways throughout their history that God was on the side of the people when they lacked power and were in distress or being mistreated, as when God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. God reminds them that they received God's liberating power, God's special attention in their distress.

And then it's the people's turn to make their case. But instead of defending themselves, the people ask God: "what do you want from us?" Do you want us to come to church more often? Do you want us to make bigger financial gifts? Would you like us to pray longer or louder? Would you like us to volunteer to serve on the church board? What do you want?

And the prophet Micah stands up in this courtroom and answers: God has already told you what God wants. "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

God is on the side of justice. God's power is directed toward those in need.

Jesus underscores this in the passage we read today. Jesus goes up a mountain and there he begins to teach his disciples about who receives God's blessing: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, and so on. This list of blessings is called the Beatitudes. And the Beatitudes reveal whose side God is on.

The people in Jesus' world believed they knew whose side God was on. They believed that God favored certain people over other people. And you could see the signs of God's favor just by looking at people. If you were wealthy, healthy, among the elite of society, these were

signs that you had pleased God and were blessed by God. And conversely the signs of God's displeasure could be seen in those who were sick, disabled, or poor. People in Jesus' society believed that power and prosperity were evidence that you were on the receiving end of God's special attention and blessing.

We might consider how similar ideas infiltrate our minds. How do we react to a reported tragedy in the life of a white, college-educated suburban dweller? How do we react when the tragedy occurs to someone of color, someone on welfare, someone with a history of police encounters?

Jesus delivers a shocking teaching in the Beatitudes. He reveals that the direction of God's divine blessing is focused on those who are vulnerable, on those in need, and on those who need empowering. In a surprising reversal of conventional wisdom, Jesus re-aligns the concept of who God sides with. And in this realignment, Jesus teaches us who we are to side with as well.

The world will have different standards as to who is blessed in our society. We can see that all around us. We see this in the policies of our government, the attitudes of our friends and neighbors, the messages in advertising. The wealthy, the powerful, the privileged receive the focus, attention, the adulation, the extra benefits and blessings of this world. But Jesus teaches his followers to look to God when determining whose side we should be on in our lives.

Right here at the start of their ministry with him, Jesus gathers his disciples around him to give them this valuable lesson. The message of the Beatitudes is also a gift Jesus gives to them for them, because Jesus understands that those who follow him in this world need God's special power upon them for the work they will be undertaking. We *modern* disciples receive this

empowering message for the work *we* undertake each day of our lives as we strive to follow Jesus. These beatitudes are for us as well:

Those of you who are poor in spirit--who are overcome and overwhelmed by hardships in life, God is on your side.

Those of you who are filled with grief, and those of you who grieve for the state of our world, God is on your side.

Those of you who are gentle and humble, God is on your side.

Those of you who hunger and thirst for the common good, God is on your side.

Those of you who extend mercy and strive to forgive, God is on your side.

Those of you who are characterized by kindness and compassion, God is on your side.

Those of you who work for peace and reconciliation, God is on your side.

Those of you who work for justice and raise your voices and give your time and efforts on behalf of justice even if that makes you unpopular, God is on your side.

We followers of Jesus, we need to know that as we walk God's unconventional way in this world--loving our enemies, helping the stranger, extending forgiveness, offering compassion, holding on to hope, giving generously, including the outcasts--as we strive to walk Jesus' way in this world, we are empowered for this walk because we have a God who is on our side.