INVITATION TO THE TABLE

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. [2] *And he began to speak and taught them, saying:*

[3] *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

[4] *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

[5] *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

[6] *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, for they will be filled.*

[7] *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

[8] *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

[9] *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

[10] *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice and righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

[11] *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* [12] *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*

Nowhere are those qualities more clearly demonstrated than in the life remembered at this table and the humility of Jesus kneeling to wash his disciples' feet.

He invites us to the table with these words: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29 NRSVUE)

Our Hymn of Communion is #399, "O God, Unseen, Yet Ever Near"

Pastoral Prayer

God of infinite grace and mercy, we want to take Jesus seriously. When I stood at the Table and read those words, "Blessed are the peacemakers," I found it nearly impossible not to think about what's happening in Minnesota, where people are assembling and protesting because their peace has been destroyed by people who should be ensuring it.

It's so tempting to make the Scriptures abstract, so we don't have to get involved; but that's impossible when real people are hurting.

We want to take Jesus seriously. Remind us that biblical peace is not passive or abstract. It's not silent. It does not pretend harm is normal so it doesn't have to respond. And it never blames the victim.

Make us peacemakers so that when we see suffering we refuse to look away; so that we care more about human dignity than about power; so that we truly believe that human lives matter more than narratives, talking points, or institutional self-protection.

Make us peacemakers who stand with the grieving, who listen to the wounded, and who ask hard questions about systems that cause harm; grant us grace to care about accountability because we care about life.

We see peacemaking in the life of Jesus, who did not bless force or domination and who stood between those who would dehumanize and those who were being dehumanized.

Grant us vision like that of the Magi who went home by another way rather than returning to Herod and becoming complicit with his murderous schemes.

Grant us courage to be peacemakers, for we already are your children. Amen.

MICAH 6:1-8 (NRSVUE)

Hear what the Lord says:
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
2 *Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord,*
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.
3 *"O my people, what have I done to you?*
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
4 *For I brought you up from the land of Egypt*
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.
5 *O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,*
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord."
6 *"With what shall I come before the Lord*
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 *Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,*
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
8 *He has told you, O mortal, what is good,*
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

***

The Word of God for the people of God!

Week before last, as I hunkered down in my warm living room in front of my fireplace, preparing to lead some kind of online spiritual experience during the snowstorm, up north in Minneapolis, clergy colleagues and thousands of others were enduring sub-zero weather, protesting and being arrested and even murdered for resisting the evils of power.

We long since in this nation moved beyond what already was belligerent, divisive partisan politics. We are witnessing state sponsored violent retribution under the direction of power-hungry potentates who have no respect for due process or the rule of law and expect total impunity for anything they do, or order done.

On January 23, 2016, at a campaign rally at Dordt University in Sioux

Center, Iowa, presidential candidate Donald Trump said, "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters."

In a December 2017 interview with the *New York Times* he said, "I have the absolute right to do what I want with the Justice Department."

On July 23, 2019, during a speech at the Turning Point USA Teen Student Action Summit in Washington, D.C., he said, "Then I have an Article II *[referring to the Constitution]*, where I have the right to do whatever I want as President."

Last week Vice President JD Vance defended an agent involved in a fatal shooting in Minneapolis on January 8 and said federal ICE agents have "absolute immunity" for their actions.

Thus far these comments have been borne out; there have been no consequences. Again, we long since in this nation have moved beyond the belligerence and divisiveness of partisan politics.

Now I truly believe in separation of church and state, but we face a crisis of basic human decency and morality and safety; a crisis initiated and sustained at the highest levels of state, supported by a troubling number of Christian groups who, having failed through witness and evangelism to convert the world to their high-demand version of Christianity; in fact, having run off more people than they attracted, have turned to the power of government to enforce their dogma. And the powers that be are only too glad to accept their support and ride their coattails.

So, how do people of faith respond when the power of state crosses the line into our realm at the invitation of some of our own, and some of our own cross the line into the realm of state? Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his book *Strength in Love* that the church must act as the "conscience of state," serving as guide and critic, but never as master, servant, or tool.

The truth is so evident that people we don't think of as religious seem to understand it better than some of the loudest voices of establishment Christianity. Jimi Hendrix, the late hard-rocking guitarist, said, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace."

I don't advocate posting religious items in public school classrooms or public offices, but I wonder why there is an obsession with posting the Ten Commandments, but not the Beatitudes, not Jesus' call to "love your enemy" or to "love your neighbor as yourself"—or the texts from today's Lectionary readings.

The timing of today's readings couldn't be more appropriate In Times of Crisis. Micah sets the pace. He reminds Israel that without God they still would be slaves in Egypt. Grace abounds. Grace also invites and empowers creative transformation, so we become our best selves, receiving and giving grace in our personal

lives, incarnating it, not in majestic buildings or elaborate liturgies but in justice, mercy, and humility.

Micah sets the pace; but he's only one of many prophetic voices that echo the same theme: God is not impressed with temples and liturgies and blood sacrifice, especially when they participate in the amassing of wealth and power. God desires justice, mercy and humility.

I see no obsession with posting these words in the high school lobby!

The opening verses of Isaiah condemn empty worship and sacrifice (1:11, 16-17)

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats.
. . . . . .
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil; learn to do good;
seek justice; rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

Where is the obsession with posting these words in the mayor's office?

Up in the northern kingdom, Amos makes it clear: (5:21-24)

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Why is there no clamor for these words to be posted on courthouse lawns?

Toward the end of Jerusalem's existence as the center of Israel's life, with Babylonian forces coming and going at will, the people remained arrogantly presumptuous: "God is in control! We'll be fine because the Temple of YHWH is here!"

In Jeremiah's famous "Temple Sermon" he leaves no doubt: (7:4-7)

Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of the YHWH." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever."

Why is there no referendum to hang these words on a banner at city hall?

Matthew (23:23) and Luke (11:42) report Jesus words: ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.***

Again in Matthew (12:1-8), on the sabbath, the disciples plucked heads of grain and began to eat them and the Pharisees went off: "Jesus, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law!" and Jesus replied, ***"...if you had known what this means*** [(and he quotes Hosea (6:6)]***, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless."***

I hear no hue and cry for these words to be engraved on a stone obelisk at the state capitol.

But see, here's the thing: there is no promise in those words that our side wins—you can't weaponize biblical justice into an instrument of control, no way to leverage mercy for profit or turn humility into a monument to oneself, even if no one else will build it. The call to justice, mercy, and humility as a challenge to the way of power got prophets stoned and Jesus crucified. That's a hard sell.

My original question this morning was, "So, how do people of faith respond when the power of state crosses the line into our realm at the invitation of some of our own, and some of our own cross the line to grab the power of state?"

It is true that the prophetic call for justice, mercy, and humility carries no promise that our side wins. On the other hand, beginning with the rise of the first conquest cultures in Mesopotamia 6,000 years ago, there have been zero examples in which the exercise of power and control produced quality of life except for those who controlled the power and wealth, and even then, that quality of life was temporary, lasting at best for a few generations. So, 6,000 years of history carry the promise that in the way of power, in the end, nobody wins.

The way of justice, mercy, and humility has never really been tried except within isolated, temporary manifestations of the church; so, while it carries no promise that our side wins, it remains the only hope for the world.

Pray with me.