

## Micah: The Social Justice Prophet

Micah 2:1-5; 4:1-4; 6:6-8

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Here we are in this second to the last prophet in our series of the Prophets. If you have been following along in Richard Rohr's *The Tears of Things* book you might be puzzled when trying to find a chapter that is specifically about the prophet Micah. There isn't one. Pastor Lois and I both feel like we Mennonite pastors in a Mennonite church can't do a series on the Prophets without including Micah! Also it would help us to finish out the month of June so we can begin anew in July with something different. Next Sunday Eric Schrag will bring the message on Jesus: the Ultimate Prophet when Pastor Lois is still in Ecuador and I will be en route to the MDS site in Spencer, Iowa tagging along with our youth and sponsors.

Growing up on the dairy farm in PA I have memory of changing shares on the chisel plow. They wore out fast in that rocky and shale ground. And we got a hold of our first electric impact, one that you plug in. While I am sure my dad warned me, I learned on about the third bolt, that you don't use your thumb to hold the head of the bolt that is set into the square carriage head. The edges of the bolts were quite sharp. I won't be too graphic here, but let me just say there were band aids involved.

Any of you who have ever been involved in changing worn out plowshares or the part of any dirt-working tool or implement that tills or turns or works the earth—on anything from a moldboard plow to a spring tooth harrow to a rototiller know that the friction of steel slicing through earth eventually wears sharp as a razor on the trailing edge and can cut you easily.

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares" Micah says. This is one of those iconic bible phrases that Anabaptists and Mennonites love to hear from, or quote. It's where the outdoor art piece at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Goessel takes its inspiration!

What beautiful and encouraging and hope-filled words these are to hear, especially during times of upheaval and war and violence in so many forms grab our news headlines and fill our social media feeds. The imagery and metaphor

“swords into plowshares” where tools of war are re-purposed into tools of agriculture is so rich and powerful that more than one prophet used it. Both Isaiah and Micah write the same thing almost word for word. Bible scholars conclude that neither of them were likely to have been quoting each other, rather this wording was drawn from a pool of earlier shared prophetic and poetic vocabulary.

This “swords to plowshares” imagery and metaphor plays so well with our traditional teaching of “nonresistance”, or non-participation in war. So too the words that follow, how there will be no need to train for war, but rather “all will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees”. Sitting in the shade of fruit-bearing vines and trees—as opposed to training for war is strong encouragement to pacifist Mennonites.

Here in the greater Goessel area we don’t have a lot of grape vines and fig trees. So maybe a generation ago we could have paraphrased this by saying “instead of going off to train for war, we are sitting in our barns and milking our cows”. Or today we might say sitting in a tractor or combine seat and planting and spraying and fertilizing and harvesting our wheat and milo and beans, or baling our alfalfa.

Let God do God’s things and we’ll do ours. Or if we aren’t involved in farming, we’ll just do our little part and let God do God’s part. Just be “the quiet in the land” as some have observed of some Anabaptist and Mennonite groups. Don’t get riled up about anything too political unless it threatens our way of life. And if our way of life is threatened, just figure out how to respond to the threats imposed on our way of life (like how to respond to a military draft), or move to a different place where you can go back to being the quiet in the land.

Is this what the prophets, and God who they speak for, have in mind for us? To be a called out community that is primarily unified around its opposition to war? More importantly, Is this what Jesus, the ultimate prophet, calls us to be and to do? I mean—we need distinctives or things that set us apart in order to maintain a sense of identity and cohesion, right?

In the chapter 2 passage that Justine read, the prophet Micah sees the violence perpetrated *within the communities* and villages of Israel and Judah, that there are those who plot violence and evil while they are on their bed 2:1-2. He sees

that there are people who lie awake dreaming of and get up thinking of how they can profit by taking advantage of the weaknesses of others. How they can take their land away from them, their houses, their estate.

If only violence were limited to times and acts of war. The prophet Micah saw right through this desire to divide things so neatly and tidily. It is so tempting. We want to draw a clear line in the sand, and of course be on what we perceive is the correct and right side of that line. If only things were that simple..

Beat your swords into plow shares, yes. But watch out, even plow shares can cut you, can cut you as badly as any sword or weapon.

We have learned too much about how we hurt and cut and do violence to each other with our words, our misunderstandings, our biases even within our separate “called out” communities and even our own families. In more recent years we have become more aware, and developed more language to talk about and try to understand the many ways we do violence to each other with words and our attitudes. We are learning that we can have differences and still get along, and even like each other!

So IS commitment to nonresistance and abstaining from war the best organizing and unifying and energizing conviction to coalesce around?

This is a core teaching that sets us apart and gives us distinction from Catholics and Protestants. We Anabaptist Mennonites are audacious enough to believe that when Jesus talks about loving our enemies he meant what he said and he was talking to us. And that probably doesn't include killing them. And we have historically been courageous enough to say no to this based on these convictions, even when our government asks us to participate in the machines of war. Is that nonresistance? That sounds like resistance!

Maybe the issue here is semantics. Refusing to comply with our government's request to serve in ways that conflict with our conscience doesn't sound like nonresistance, does it.

We resist because we know war inflicts unimaginable horror and suffering and trauma that ripples on for generations to come. The magnitude of harm to the

innocent caught up in war cannot be overstated—on either side of any armed conflict intent on doing physical harm or to seize or maintain land or power or influence through bloodshed. We are clear-eyed about that.

But let's not get hung up on the semantics. After all, resisting by refusing military service may indicate little of our commitment to non-violent ways of living. Even plow shares can cut you..

In fact, if we're not careful, we even do violence to each other even around the question of military service, and we may even unintentionally shame young people for choosing to enlist. This too, is violence.

So back to our question of identity as Anabaptists and Mennonites. Are we to passively disengage from the rest of the world and do whatever we can to preserve our God-given and Christ inspired heritage?

Let's look at some more words from Micah. In 6:6-8 Micah says in another oft-quoted passage "DO justice, Love Mercy, walk Humbly!"

Do justice. That sounds active, doesn't it. Not just try to avoid violence and stay neutral and wait for God to make the world a more kind and peaceful place.

Micah is calling Israel and Judah, not just to aspire to a vision where weapons or war are no longer desired, but to get involved in making the world into a place where justice prevails. To stand up against injustice. To resist.

South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said once when speaking of Micah: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor...If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

How do we do justice? How do we love mercy, or kindness? We get involved. We stay informed. We stand up against injustice. We build or repair houses for those who have lost them or need them and fall through the cracks of government assistance. On Juneteenth and every day we learn about and acknowledge the white supremacy that is at the heart of the persistent injustice that people of color experience in this country. We stand with compassion with

those who have arrived at our border destitute and traumatized, seeking a place of refuge and safety and hope. We find and create safe and nurturing homes for children who are without them. We do what we can to give those with all types of disabilities and challenges to learning a leg up in our communities. We stand ready to support those among us who struggle with addiction (which may be most of us) when they are ready to begin recovery.

When I was talking about the quiet in the land earlier I bet there were lots of you who wanted to argue with me. Many of us have NOT simply been the quiet in the land keeping your heads down and letting God do God's things while we do ours. Many of you responded to the military draft, or to God's call to serve by serving in other ways besides staying quietly in your community. You did Civilian Public Service and then 1-W classification of alternative service in hospitals, and other care facilities, building dams, fighting fires, serving in overseas missions, and many other ways.

We're going to hear some of these stories on our July 5 Peace Reflection Sunday. And of course we want to encourage you younger folks to be thinking about how you would respond if the US government were to reinstitute a draft, and maybe write some things down so there is some prior record of that. This is something we all need to reflect on in this unpredictable time we're in. The intent of your pastors and the peace committee here at AMC is to get us all thinking about not only how to abstain from war, but how to do our part to make the world better!

I'm amazed at the number of us who have or have had careers that actively work for justice. Much of that grew out of your alternative service experiences. Whether it's working in one of the Mennonite organizations like MCC, MDS, MMN, or in healthcare, or mental health care facilities like PrairieView—much of these organizations actually grew out of the experience of Mennonites who did alternative service and saw the incredible need for mental health services in this country and in their home churches and communities. Or in agriculture, working for more ecological just and sustainable and equitable farming practices. Or as teachers and educators who educate the next generation and are so patient with those who have challenges to learning and may need a little extra support—and you offer it! Or those who do a gap year, or serve at a camp or even travel abroad with the Good News of God's love.

In so doing, we not only abstain from war, we wage peace. We wage peace by actively working to root out injustice everywhere. We spread mercy, or kindness wherever we go, and we do it in all humility knowing that we too are a part of the systems that hold people back from being all that God intends them to be. And in so doing, we can do our part to slowly change the system.

And we're going to have lots more conversation about this on July 5 when we set aside a Sunday to talk about how we can be a people who aren't just the quiet in the land, abstaining from war, but continue to be actively engaged in creating a world where the threat of violence to preserve order gradually diminishes or even becomes unnecessary.

God, since the first violent act of Cain and Abel, has been calling God's people to peace through justice. The prophets imagined this. Jesus exemplified this. And we can join God in bringing about this vision as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. It's not quick work, but as MLK loved to say, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice".

Let's keep imagining this world. Let's Do Justice, love kindness, and do it all in humility knowing we won't always get it right.