

26th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 11.5.17

Scripture: Micah 3:1-12
Matthew 23:1-12

The guys in the writing course that I teach at the prison don't do much actual writing. Every week I encourage them to write. I've provided them with notebooks and prompts. ("Write about courage – a time when you've demonstrated it or a time when you failed to." "Write about power – a time when you've had it, or when you haven't.") I've provided them with examples – poetry of many forms and subject matters, prose pieces about dirt and car crashes and everything in between. Every week they say they'll do it, though not convincingly. And every next week, they come back to class not having done it.

There have been a couple students to break that mold, but just a couple.

One of them once wrote a poem about heroin.

The poem wasn't much as far as poetry is concerned. No one in the class is going to come out a great poet, including me. It's really all just an excuse to practice the art of human conversation, curiosity and connection, which is actually more crucial than being an excellent poet. The world will be a fine place if just a few of us are great poets, but it would suffer terribly if just a few of us were any good at conversing, at "using our words."

I figure a lot of the people who end up in prison here in Berkshire County are there primarily because their most basic attempts to connect with others have been frustrated. The other day, on North Street in Pittsfield, I watched as two people walking along together screamed at each other, a man and a woman, screaming, pushing, he charging off while she dropped her noisy self on a stoop, sitting there for a moment before wandering off in search of the man. They seemed to know one another fairly well, seemed to accommodate each other's explosiveness, not to mention each other's lack of sobriety, or at least hers. Maybe they were even in a steady relationship together. If so, it wasn't a gratifying one, clearly. I had the thought, "See you at the house of correction. Consider taking my writing class."

Maybe next time I offer it, I'll name it what it actually is: Using Your Words. You know, instead of your fists, or your gut, before giving up on it altogether.

This one student—he used his words. He wrote a poem about an experience that I imagine would be difficult to put into words. Heroin use, from what I hear, is pretty intense, though also numbing. As I said, the poem as poetry wasn't much, but the content of the poem was, to my mind, a horror-show. I can't quote it, couldn't even paraphrase it. I can only say I thought the point of it was preventative—a sort of “scared straight” approach to describing this addiction. No one would seek out the experience being written of here.

But others in class heard it as stoking—stoking the master appetite they were trying to quell or overcome.

“Oh, you're making me want heroin,” the most boisterous member of the class said.

“That makes you want heroin?” I asked, incredulous. “That sounds like a litany of why one really would *not*.”

I don't know anything about the people in my class except what they reveal in class. I don't know about their lives, their struggles, their crimes, their prospects for when they're released. But I do imagine a lot of them are there because of addiction, and I imagine a lot of those addictions are to heroin, to opioids.

The opioid crisis is largely due to the over-prescription of opioid painkillers—Oxycontin, Oxycodone. Made of the same ingredients that make up heroin, these have been over-prescribed for nearly twenty years now, and because of the marketing success of the company behind their development, Purdue Pharma.

They run a tight ship over at Purdue Pharma in Stamford, CT. This one company develops their drugs, tests them and finds them miraculously effective, and then markets them, usually and most successfully direct to doctors. Their annual revenue, in recent years, since their pushing Oxycontin hard, is \$3 billion dollars. Much of that money is paid out by the public. Medicare and Medicaid are the health care plans that enable many of the patients who use “oxy” to obtain it. This means the public pays twice; *we* pay twice, first to cover the costs of the “medication,” and then to cover the

cost of the addiction that often results. Disability, unemployment, incarceration, a depletion of the productive labor force: these are expensive items! They make a Gucci purse look like a bargain!

Purdue Pharma is a privately held company, still controlled mostly by one family, the Sacklers. They're worth \$14 billion.

Sackler: that's a name you might know from recent articles about the family in *The New Yorker* and *Esquire Magazine*, or from less recent articles in *Forbes Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Or you might know it from art museums bearing their name or medical schools, or even an escalator in a museum in London. Or maybe you know it from cultural events the family has underwritten. Tanglewood, for example, enjoys the support of the Sacklers, as do Harvard and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Incidentally, it's a name I know from high school, a classmate of mine being the only immediate member of the family still to sit on the board of directors, Mortimer – as far as we know. This is a very closely-held company and in many ways secretive family. (He asked me to prom. Mortimer did. I said no. I think I already had a date, which is another surprising matter. The girl he eventually came with he presented with a bracelet from Tiffany's. The entire prom was a-flutter with that fact.)

One thing we don't know that name from is treatment facilities for those seeking recovery from addiction. So far there's no Sackler Recovery Clinic, or chain thereof, one in every town and city. There are no Sackler programs at local prisons for those who landed there because of painkillers. There's no Sackler equivalent to the Brien Center, which is Berkshire County's go-to place as regards the opioid crisis, where everyone on the staff is overworked and underpaid.

If I sound bitter, rest assured I am. If I sound despairing to you, you're not wrong in your perception. If I sound like Micah, then you really know your Bible.

Micah lived around the same time as the prophet Isaiah, when the Assyrian Empire was moving westward, after Syria had lost its freedom and its capital city Damascus had fallen, after Israel had lost its freedom and its capital city Samaria had fallen, but prior to when Judah would fall and its capital city Jerusalem would be left in ruin. Like Isaiah, Micah looked eastward and saw what was coming, a tide of

destruction no one could stop. Worse, the leadership of Judah seemed intent on provoking calamity. Their anti-Assyrian posturing and policies only made Assyrian posturing and policies that much more wrathful and inevitable – all when strategic patience might have been the better course.

It incensed Micah. It *incensed* him that the leadership of his nation could be so casual about how it used its power, its political-religious-economic power. Of course that was all intertwined then. There was no difference between political authorities and religious authorities, there was no difference between these power structures of politics, religion, and economy.

I should say I doubt there's much difference these days, either. After all, people approach both politics and capital with a religious fervor we who practice a religion might wish people brought to religion. Oh, well. The more things change the more they stay the same.

But, you know, maybe fervor isn't what we should be cultivating in any realm. This seems to be one point Micah wants to make, that neither heavy religiosity nor political posturing is what God has in mind as far as righteous living goes. All God means for us is that we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

This beautiful, calming voice of prophecy; this favored and most quoted line of biblical admonition: that comes from Micah. Micah would say it, which is to say Micah would get there. A few chapters hence, Micah would eventually come to such a soothing, simplifying, clarifying statement.

As for now, though, Micah was incensed – and in this way he differed from his fellow prophet, Isaiah. These people, after all, these people in charge: they were grossly unworthy of what power they'd been given. They were, Micah discovered, grossly abusive of it. "Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel," Micah prophesied. "Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron."

This he discovered because, also different from Isaiah, Micah didn't get into prophecy as a birthright.

That was formal position, you know. To be a prophet was to hold a formal position in the life of the people. Prophets worked in the Temple, and advised in governance and foreign policy, doing so often in the form of exhortatory poetry, as we read in the Bible. Think: a combination between a nation's poet laureate and its presidential cabinet. Prophets were artful in their thinking through all the challenges, shortfalls, and points of light in the life of the people as a people of God; but they were artful toward pragmatic ends. And, as it happens, many of them were born into prophecy as a sort of family business. The prophets had fathers who were prophets, and those fathers had fathers who were prophets. Many of them were unremarkable at this, most perhaps. But a few spoke such beautiful and terrible truth that they've been canonized for the ages.

Micah, though: Micah wasn't even from Jerusalem, where most prophets lived and worked and were from. No, Micah was from a hill-town, Moresheth. And this might be why he was so scandalized by the unworthy leadership he found in Jerusalem once he got there. It might be the case that he'd long taken as an article of faith, those in charge of the collective life of the people were worthy of that charge, and they meant well by it. He might have simply assumed that of course those who were on top deserved their given honor and glory, did right by their power and influence.

Of course! Right?

The realization that this wasn't actually so might have come as a real loss, a real trauma.

Disillusionment can hurt.

Really, what might have felt like a familiar tragedy to the likes of Isaiah – that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely – might have felt like a grotesque shock to the likes of Micah. Isaiah had perhaps always been wise to the ways of the world; but Micah, he was Mr. Smith come to Washington.

I can relate. I'm something of a hick myself. When I asked Mortimer, when he'd just learned of his acceptance to Harvard back in 1989, both of us seniors at Exeter, what

he wanted to study when he got to Harvard, and he answered, “Business,” and I asked, “What kind of my business?” and he answered, “My father’s,” I think I figured his father must be a business owner, like Mr. Wallant who owned the pharmacy in North Hampton where I grew up, or Mr. Philbrick whose one sports gear store became a whole chain along the seacoast, or the Fullers who owned all those car dealerships throughout New Hampshire.

Their house was *really* big, and overlooked the ocean!

What a fool I was. And, damn, it hurts to discover that some of the masters of universe can be so *mean*.

Watch the film about opioid addiction and death, which the *Cincinnati Enquirer* produced of one week in their city. Watch it and tell me it’s not the case that people are profiting while others have their skin torn off and the flesh withered from their bones.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant to ease with this preaching. In the last week of his life, at the last stop of his itinerant ministry, Jesus took his hick disciples aside – and perhaps to prepare them for what would happen at the end of the week. The religious authorities would hand Jesus over to the imperial authorities to be crucified, by which the religious authorities could maintain their fragile control within the empire that wouldn’t stand to be bothered by them. The agreement was tacit but clear: the imperial authorities of Rome depended on the religious authorities of Jerusalem to keep their people in line, rightly cowed and obedient, so Rome could safely ignore them; and the religious authorities in Jerusalem depended on the imperial authorities of Rome to do just that, mostly ignore them.

It was a compromise that worked for the people for the most part. But it was a compromise, and it benefitted some a lot more than others. Chief among these beneficiaries: the religious authorities. Chief among those on the losing end, at least this week: Jesus.

Yes, he’d been riling people up. He’d been casting into doubt the entire way the world is put together, with its cheap version of justice, and its calculated shows of mercy, and its spiritual life feeding an economic engine. He was upsetting the whole brittle apparatus, which the people in charge of that apparatus wouldn’t stand for. So

they'd do their worst, though keeping their hands clean. They'd hand him over to another authority that would do the thing they wouldn't deign to do: crucify him, crucify him.

Yes, but that's a pretty high price to pay for riling and revealing.

Therefore, Jesus preached: "Do whatever the scribes and Pharisees teach you, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach."

The world seems full of people unworthy of the power they hold, and the world also seems full of people expected to live by rules they're set up from the beginning to be hamstrung by. What the Sacklers get away with on a grand scale, people in Pittsfield get arrested for on a petty scale. What white people get away with when we're out and about, black people might be killed for. What women claim men have done to them might be dismissed as untrustworthy testimony, but when a man claims something similar was done to him, down comes the punishment, swift and sure. This actually feels like a defining feature of the news I take in on a daily basis: everywhere are powerful, privileged people getting away with things that would have regular people landing in prison, landing in sheol, or at least landing in failure. And I feel like I can't take it anymore. I can't absorb it. I can't hold it. It's a scalding iron that I'm holding with my bare hands.

What's more, I don't like the energizing force that comes of grievance. I'm deeply skeptical of human experience that's defined by resentment. I really *don't* want to head out into my everyday with the sense that someone's trying to screw me and my job is to make sure that that doesn't happen, or better that the one trying to do the screwing gets what's coming to him (or her). I actually don't want to be sharpening my pitchfork and dousing with oil all these torches; I don't mean to understand myself as a victim or even as a "survivor." I just want to be a human among fellow humans. I think I truly do just want to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with my God, with *our* God. I want to do this with *you*.

And yet these scripture readings, these end-of-the-liturgical-year scripture readings, each week throughout these three months from the gospel of Matthew, but this week also from the prophet Micah: they redound with our current state of things. It

makes a body not want to come to church. After all, we can stay home with the newspaper and feel just as terrible, but in the familiar comfort of our own meager homes.

It tempts a body to aim not to mind it.

Cynicism, really, is the safest response.

But, listen, whenever we revisit the litany of injustices that define our lives, we revisit also the sense of justice that we're called to hold to as a vision and to make real as a practice. Whenever we reacquaint with the incensing aspects of life in the world, we might also rekindle in ourselves the sense of mission that charges life with purpose and blessing.

It's funny to me when people assume the life of faith is a life of comfort, of comforting assurances that help believers cope. I hear this sometimes from people who don't practice a faith. They seem to assume religious life is about telling yourself fairy stories so you escape from the way things really are. But so many of our classical religious texts take on the way things really are like a strongman wrestling a bear.

So it's funny to me because just as often as I'm comforted by my faith, I'm dismayed by it, incensed by it. The world as it is, is not the world that Christ would have it be and would have us work to make. Practicing this faith, then, is a regular reminder of all that should give us unrest.

These days, there is perhaps more of that than ever. Or maybe not. Maybe it's true that things have always been this bad and have always been this good; it's just the particulars of things that have changed. What's also true is that God is as ever with us, the Holy Spirit fills us with resilience and hope, and Jesus gathers us together that we might discern how each of us might be true to Jesus' way of abundant life amidst a beloved community.

As for those who've figured out how to make the evils of the world profit them, even they might be moved by the appeal of love. Let's see. Let's try that.

Thanks be to God.