

United Church in the Valley: February 3, 2019
 Student Minister: Matthew Heesing
Making Space for the Spiritual
 “...through Work of Justice”

*Note: Part III of this series, “...through Weekly Practice,”
 was a Messy Worship service without a sermon.*

Scripture Reading:

Micah 6:8:

People of God, listen carefully:
 God has told you what is good.
 Over and over, God has made abundantly clear
the best way to be:
 work for justice,
 embrace loving kindness,
 and walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 25:35-40

Jesus was talking to his disciples
 about what the kingdom of heaven
 would look like, here on earth.
 “In the end,” he said,
 “it’s as if a *King* would say to his people:

“I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat.
 I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.
 I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.
 I was naked, and you gave me clothes.
 I was sick, and you took care of me.
 I was in prison, and you visited me.”

But everyone will respond,
 “Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you,
 or thirsty, and give you a drink?
 When did we see you as a stranger, and welcome you,
 or naked, and give you clothes to wear?
 When did we see you sick or in prison,
 and care for you and visit you?”

“I assure you,” the King will reply,
 “every time you did this
 for the least of these—
 you also did it to me.”

Sermon:

Over the season of Epiphany,
we've been exploring the idea
of Making Space for the Spiritual.

And we started
with Making Space for the Spiritual through *wonder*:
wonder, being this internal feeling,
this personal attitude of awe and gratitude,
that we experience deep within ourselves;
and our sense of wonder moves us
to make Space for the Spiritual through *worship*:
worship, being an outward act, a faithful expression
that we do as individuals
but in the company of others;
and our regular worship moves us
to make Space for the Spiritual through *weekly practice*:
because we don't just make space for the spiritual
on Sunday mornings;
we make room for the holy all throughout the week
through different practices, efforts,
habits and customs,
both on our own,
but also involving
those in our homes,
our families, our neighbors,
and networks of friends.

Maybe you've noticed,
that as we've talked about the notion
of making Space for the Spiritual,
we've been *increasingly* moving
from the private and personal
to the public and communal:
it seems
that the more we make space for the spiritual,
the more we make space for others around us,
as we move from wonder
to worship,
to weekly practice,
and now, today,
the work of *justice*.

But before we can talk about the work of justice,
we first have to talk about the Book of Micah,
and then the Hebrew word *mishpat*,
which will lead us to the ministry of Jesus—

and Jesus will help us understand
what the work of justice looks like in the world—
and how such work
makes space for the Spiritual.

So first, the book of Micah.

Three weeks ago,
we began this series
by looking at the very beginning of the Bible—
the Book of Genesis,
the story of Creation,
a poem with the purpose of sparking wonder.
And then two weeks ago,
we looked at the very *last* book of the Bible,
the Book of Revelation,
and its picture and powerful reminder of worship
with everyone circled around the throne.
And today, we are going to look
at the *middle* of the Bible,
the book of Micah—
for there's 66 books in the Bible,
and Micah is precisely number 33,
because I want each of us to see
how the *whole* Bible,
from beginning, to end, and even the middle,
is *all* about making space for the spiritual.
The Bible is a story
of people making space for the spiritual
in the best way that they knew how, at the time,
in poetry, and song and rhyme,
in story, and prayer, and prophecy, and history,
it's all about people making space for the spiritual.

And in the process,
Micah represents one of several
course-corrections on the journey—
for Micah was a prophet,
a holy person in the Hebrew tradition,
because prophets functioned as a sort-of
spokesperson for God—
someone who delivered,
not a prediction for the future,
but a message from God for the present time.

And Micah, as with *many* of the prophets in Scripture,
 was preoccupied with how the people of God
 were missing the point:
 just prior to the passage that we heard,
 Micah criticizes the Israelites
 for believing that Making Space for the Spiritual,
 cultivating a closer relationship with the divine,
 somehow required extravagant offerings
 and extensive, intensive rituals and sacrifices,—
 but, no, on the contrary, Micah proclaims,
*“People of God, listen carefully:
 God has told you what is good.
 Over and over, God has made abundantly clear
 the best way to be:
 work for justice,
 embrace loving kindness,
 and walk humbly with your God.”*

Making Space for the Spiritual,
 living in the Way that God wants us to be,
 for Micah, involves working for justice.

But justice, as it’s translated here,
 might not be exactly what you’re thinking.
 For the word that Micah uses for justice,
 is the Hebrew word *mishpat*.
 Say it with me, now—*mishpat*.

Mishpat occurs over two hundred times
 across the Hebrew Scriptures.
 And as one scholar explains,
mishpat means to “make things right.”¹
 To “make things right.”

Now, I think it’s often true
 that whenever you and I think of justice,
 of “making things right,”
 we probably picture some sort of punishment,
 of holding people accountable when they do something wrong—
 justice, in our modern North American mindset,
 is often understood as the firm upholding of the law,
 the enforcing of fines and penalties and consequences.
 And that’s *part* of what *mishpat* means.
 That’s a *small* part of how we make things right.

¹ See Tim Keller, “What is Biblical Justice?” <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/what-biblical-justice>;
 and <https://www.worldvision.org/blog/social-justice-really-mean>.

But the Biblical meaning of justice
 is *so* much broader—
 even more than punishing the guilty,
 the idea of *mishpat* is primarily
 and even overwhelmingly concerned
 with protecting and looking after the vulnerable;
mishpat, most of all, is about
 “making things right”
 for the least of those among us,
 the marginalized, the suffering,
 the excluded, and the exploited

Over and over in the Hebrew Scriptures,
 the word *mishpat*, the word justice,
 is consistently used in the context of
 taking up the care and the cause
 of the widows, the orphans,
 the immigrants, and the poor—
 justice, “making things right,” is,
 more than anything else,
 the work of making sure
 that these specific groups have the basic necessities—
 food, shelter, community, safety;
injustice, on the other hand,
 is when these particular groups are taken advantage of
 or outright ignored.

Mishpat—or justice—or making things right
 especially among the least of those among us and around us
 is according to Micah,
 the best way to be.

And it’s the best way to be,
 because that’s how God *is*.²
 Psalm 68:4-5 says
 “God is a parent to the orphan,
 a defender of the widow”;
 and in the book of *Exodus*,
 when God’s people, oppressed and captive,
 called out in desperation,
 Scripture says God heard their cry,
 and was moved and full of empathetic pain;
 and Psalm 146:9 says
 “The Lord watches over the immigrant,
 and sustains the orphan and the widow,”

² See Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian* (HarperOne: New York, 2011), 137-141.

and among countless other examples,
Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says
“God seeks justice for orphans and widows,
and loves the immigrants.”

All of Scripture attests that our God is a God of justice,
of *mishpat*, of making things right,
especially concerning the least of those among us.

So making space for the spiritual, then,
making space for the one we call God in our lives,
must involve making space for the work of justice.

But you might be wondering:
well, what does the “work of justice” really look like?
What does it mean for us to “make things right”,
to practice “mishpat” in our everyday living?

To answer *that*, all we have to do
is examine the ministry of Jesus.
If Jesus is the holy found in human form,
if Jesus, more than anyone,
embodied the heart of God,
than Jesus can surely show us an example
of what justice can look like—
and he *does*,
throughout the four related accounts
of his life and work and living.

But at the conclusion of Jesus’ teachings
in the Gospel according to the apostle Matthew,
Jesus adds this interesting little twist
to the practice of *mishpat*:

*For Jesus was talking to his disciples
about what the kingdom of heaven
would look like, here on earth.*

*“In the end,” he said,
“it’s as if a King would say to his people:*

*“I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat.
I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink.
I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.
I was naked, and you gave me clothes.
I was sick, and you took care of me.
I was in prison, and you visited me.”*

*But everyone will respond,
“Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you,
or thirsty, and give you a drink?*

*When did we see you as a stranger, and welcome you,
or naked, and give you clothes to wear?
When did we see you sick or in prison,
and care for you and visit you?”
“I assure you,” the King will reply,
“every time you did this for the least of these—
those in need of justice—
you also did it to me.”*

The work of justice is
really quite simple, according to Jesus:
it’s a meal,
a drink, an article of clothing;
it’s a welcome,
a visit, an act of care.

It really is that simple—
yet nonetheless incredibly profound,
for in practicing *mishpat*, Jesus proclaims,
in creating room in our lives
to “make things right” with others,
by making space for the work of justice,
much to our completely surprise, in the process,
we end up also making space for the spiritual—

*“I assure you,” the King will reply,
“every time you did this for the least of these—
those in need of justice—you also did it to me.”*

What Jesus implies is that
the holy, the source of love we call divine,
the Spiritual
is not just *focused* on justice,
it is *found* in justice.
God does not just *pursue* justice—
God is found *through* the work of justice also.
In making space for the work of justice,
in making space in our lives
for the hungry, the cold, the lonely and old,
when we make space for everyone to be made right,
it’s precisely in such space,
that we encounter Christ’s light.

In one sense, making space for the spiritual starts deep within—
a sense of *wonder* is how we can begin,
and our wonder can evolve into worship,
a time when together, we sing and we pray,
and worship can move us to practice weekly,
each and every single day,
which can urge and guide us even
further along the way of God,
to do the work of justice,
to have a *mishpat* mindset,
to care for the least and the outcast,
the last and the lonely—

so on the one hand, yes, it's true,
that the more we make space for the spiritual,
the more we make space for others too.

But Jesus also implies the opposite:
that the more we make space for *others* in our lives,
the more we make space for the *spiritual*
to be encountered, experienced, shown and known.

Making space for the spiritual can start within,
or making space for the spiritual can start around—
on the ground,
as we meet the needs of others,
as we make things right.

So people of God,
however we want to start,
deep in our heart,
or by doing our part,
in this specific time and place,
may we all continue making space
for the spiritual
through wonder,
worship,
weekly practice,
and work of justice.

Thanks be to God.