

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, July 5, 2009 based on Micah 6:1-8.

With Liberty and Justice for All
God bless America, land that I love
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above
From the mountains To the prairies,
To the ocean white with foam
God bless America, My home sweet home
God bless America, My home sweet home

Happy belated 4th of July everyone! I hope you had a good way to celebrate our nation's independence!

I love being an American! And I didn't have to do anything to become one – My parents happened to be Americans living in Illinois when I was born. So because of that I am one too! This is a great example of the meaning of grace – a benefit just because of who you are. I didn't have to earn it or justify it. I just am. That's grace!

I like being an American because of the abundance and beauty of the land. What a beautiful country we have! The mountains, the food we produce, the bountiful resources that surround us, and the economic opportunity that this land brings all are such a blessing. But also I especially like being an American because of our ideals. I like the ability to come and go, free speak, free assembly, free to bear arms, free to worship or not worship a higher power without government intervention, free to freely exchange ideas – free.

I love being an American! But I am disappointed at times because of what we do as Americans – what we do to each other and what we do in the world. But most of all I am disappointed when we don't live up to our ideas and values. This distressed me most of all!

Right now, we are nervous people. We are nervous how we can be a great nation with great ideals and values and yet find a way for all to have access to basic things like food, housing, medical care and not bankrupt the system. We are nervous. How are we going to do it! Right now state and local governments are struggling with diminishing revenues. Yet, the poor still need medical care. On top of that, 47 million Americans do not have health insurance, and people who do have insurance panic if there is a job loss. How much political will do we have to live up to our ideals of equal access and opportunity for all?

We spend billions on military might. Yet our streets are crumbling, our schools are lacking resources, our young wonder what kind of future they will have. Right now we are nervous.

Let's see if this newspaper article sounds familiar and see if you can guess where it came from:

The headline read: "Urban-Military Establishment Usurps Well-being of the Disadvantaged." The article read:

A growing centralization of power and an ever-increasing fear of the enemy seem to be consuming the resources of our nation. Especially hard hit are the rural poor, rising taxes are draining the life out of the nation's farm families while impossible interest rates and loan policies

are squeezing them almost out of existence. To make matters worse, crime and corruption in the city are at an all time high.

In addition, one analyst observes that increasing numbers of merchants have been supplying inferior merchandise, shortchanging customers, taking unbelievable shortcuts in construction, and knowingly using weighted scales to sell and buy merchandise. And the analyst claims, when these cases come to court, all too often, the judges seem to hand out lighter sentences to those who are in a position to make the judge's life more comfortable.

While poverty and hunger run rampant and homeless people walk the city streets, the wealthy build more and more luxurious homes with little regard for the pain of their neighbors. The rich just seem to get richer, while the poor get poorer, and this reporter is tempted to ask, 'How long can the country endure such injustice? How long will it be until violent revolution breaks out?'

What do you think – the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, a Moscow paper? The article goes on to say:

Prominent religious leaders here are being accused of lining their pockets with the contributions of their followers. Their accusers claim that these men are guilty of saying only what the rich people pay them to say. These men claim to speak for God, but in reality speak only to advance their own wealth and power. They have turned faith into a financial commodity and the practice of religion into a hoax.

Any ideas about the location of this newspaper article? – Italy, Iran, South Africa?

Would you be surprised if I told you it came from Israel, but not from this year but from around 2700 years ago? Now, of course, there was no such newspaper then. The printing press would not be invented for another 2000 years. But this article sum up how the prophet Micah saw life in his country at the time.

Micah was a prophet who lived in a rural town around the city of Jerusalem about the same time as the prophet Isaiah. Unfortunately, many of the things that Micah said 2700 years ago could be read in the newspaper today. Many of the concerns of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures are still concerns today. As Micah saw it, leaders of government, business, and even religion, were insensitive to the needs of people and obsessed with maintaining their own power and resources over others especially the poor and the powerless. Micah's complaint was a lack of community spirit and the lack of justice among God's chosen people.

So what does Micah do? He brings a lawsuit. He brings a suit to the heavenly court with creation as the jury and God as the prosecutor:

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

Then in the next sentences, God speaks to the people of Israel directly and brings the lawsuit:

"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 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. 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."

Then comes a question from a worshiper:

"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? 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?"

And the answer comes from Micah:

God 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?

"To do justice" (*mishpat* in Hebrew) concerns the establishment of equity in the courts, in the marketplace, and in all human relationships. In the Bible, justice is more than law and order. Justice is also about fairness in the market place and in relationships. Every society needs laws and judges to settle disputes but also every society needs a system that encourages people to treat each other fairly and responsibly. Justice is about fairness in business, in government, in organization, and in relationships. Justice is about fairness and equity.

We struggle today, for example, about how much access people have to the court system to settle issues. Attorneys are very good but also expensive for most. We have lost our nerve to supplement or provide attorneys so that all can have access. We struggle with those with means being able to use the legal system to their advantage.

“To love kindness” (*chesed* in Hebrew) is to maintain solidarity with others, including those in need or trouble. “To love kindness” is to continually do things that you don’t need to do, but do them anyway because that’s what it means to be in relationship with God.

So to get a blessing, according to Micah, is to practice justice and loving kindness and walk humbly with God. Unfortunately, we tend to be like the people of Micah’s day. We think we can get a blessing with rituals and appeasing talk. But apparently, blessings come from doing something – practicing justice and compassion.

Back in Micah’s day, people felt that they needed to appease God with sacrifices. Micah emphasizes that to be devote is to walk humbly with God and then serve by practicing *misphat* and *chesed*. Sometimes we think that being religious is to appease God by showing up for worship. God already know that God is great, that God is good, that God is the source of life, that God is love. God already know these things. Worship is our opportunity to discover these things, believe them and be transformed by them. Being religious also means doing something like doing justice and loving kindness. These things shape us!

Today the Unites States of America is a great country! We have many resources and opportunities. We have an economic engine that

creates wealth and prosperity. We have a military and economic presence in the world. But we are nothing if we do not practice justice and loving kindness. We say we believe in it. We talk about it all the time:

I pledge allegiance to the flag
Of the United States of America
And to the Republic for which it stands
One Nation, under God, indivisible
With liberty and justice for all.

“liberty and justice for all” – not just the people we feel like giving it to, not just a few, not just to people with the same color of skin we have, not just to a select few – but to all!

One of the things that the church can do is to be a voice of fairness and loving kindness in the land. We have a voice and are invited to use it. This is why churches engage in social justice and fairness in the land and advocates for all people.

This is why churches take health care so seriously, and invites us to find a way to include all, not just some in our system of medicine. And the church invites us to not be afraid.

It is fear that prevents us from doing transformational things and the right thing. When we are afraid, we put our head down and not see the unfairness of our health system or our employment methods or our educational system. We are afraid to see and act.

But when we walk humbly with our God, God invites us to look up and see how things are and invites us to not be afraid. There is a way for

all to have a place at the table. It takes commitment. Loving kindness always finds a way.

We do have values as Americans! And with values come responsibilities to use our blessing wisely. What makes us unique is that we say that we believe and practice these things.

John Adams' famous letter of July 3, 1776, in which he wrote to his wife Abigail what his thoughts were about celebrating the Fourth of July is found on various web sites but is usually incorrectly quoted. Following is the exact text from his letter with his original spellings:

The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more. You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not. I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means. And that Posterity will triumph in that Days Transaction, even altho We should rue it, which I trust in God We shall not. (*The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*, Harvard University Press, 1975, 142).

We are the benefactors of this toil and blood. I love this country! I love what it stands for. I love it so much that I expect - no I demand that we and our leaders live up to these ideals - liberty and justice for all. Our faith gives us a path to practice it – justice and loving kindness. Together, these principles make us great. God bless America when we practice these ways! Amen.