

Sunday, January 30, 2011: Micah 6:1-8

January 25, 2011

The opening words on the telephone call were familiar: "You don't know me but I know about you. . . ." Since leaving the Presbyterian ministry 20 years ago I've had a number of such calls.

The person on the other end of the line was a father whose 17-year-old son had just revealed to his parents that he was gay. The boy's parents felt a mixture of devastation and helplessness. As active Presbyterians in their local church, their first impulse was to call their pastor. The pastor's advice was to call me.

That afternoon I left work early and drove over to their house. The three of us sat and talked about a range of issues and concerns. "Are we, his parents, responsible for his homosexuality? Doesn't the Bible say this is wrong? Should our son see a counselor? What will people in our congregation think?" Along with the questions came tears of grief. Their son was not who they dreamed he would become. Their fundamental assumptions about faith, family and sexuality were all brought into question. Intuitively they knew that their family would never be the same.

It's a familiar story, and one that can be transformative. Though often painful and messy, it is shaped by a mysterious mix of letting go and taking in, of judgment and redemption. I have witnessed it many times, and the experiences have brought immeasurable joy into my life.

It's also a familiar dynamic in scripture, and one that the prophet Micah articulates with searing clarity. What makes Micah's witness memorable is that the emphasis falls on the saving action of God. Predicting military conquest at the hands of a foreign power fueled by aristocratic corruption in Judah, Micah foresees a time of peace when nations will beat their swords into plowshares (3:9-4:4) and a new kind of ruler will come—from Bethlehem (5:2). Micah's contemporary prophecy follows an ancient pattern of salvation history: the Israelites too were delivered from slavery and crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land (6:3-5). For Micah, God's initiative, though painful and messy, ends on a high note.

During my afternoon conversation with the parents of the 17-year-old, I had the privilege of sharing some of the story of how I became aware of my sexual orientation. I explained how I learned that there was no one to blame, that my identity as a gay man was a gift from God, and that the Bible was not a roadblock to acceptance but a message of hope for every gay and lesbian person and his or her parents. Over the course of the next year, the journey brought these parents more than a change of heart; it took them through a conversion experience to a spiritual awakening.

Another characteristic of Micah's prophecy is his cogent description of the sanctified life that flows from God's saving action: justice, which is the work for fairness and equality, with special concern for the powerless; mercy or kindness, a divine quality rooted in covenantal faithfulness and unmerited love; and humility, which is a deliberate, careful walk with God shaped by God's desires and will.

These three qualities of divine expectation are not three separate paths of discipleship, as if there were a division of labor in the community of faith between justice doers, mercy lovers and humble walkers-in-the-faith. This is no neat three-point sermon; rather, the combination of the three qualities in one crisp sentence suggests some interplay and interdependence. Doing justice must include being merciful. A humble walk with God must embody justice. Justice, mercy and humility are inextricably linked, forming a holistic, dynamic lifestyle that sends us out into a world that God continues to redeem.

After coming out of the closet and fully embracing God's mercy in my own life, I was ready to start doing justice, working to change church policy so that no other gay sister or brother in the faith would have to experience what I went through in leaving the ministry. But after almost a decade of leading the charge in legislative combat within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I've learned through institutional inertia and personal exhaustion that systemic change doesn't happen without the personal transformation of others within the system. Doing justice must be rooted in the grace of a merciful God.

I understand the frustration and disappointment of my friends who believe that "justice delayed is justice denied." But conversion runs on God's time. Securing a majority vote on the floor of a national church meeting does not change hearts in a congregation. Appeals to "doing justice" fall on the deaf ears of those who have yet to experience the transformative power of God's mercy and thus to look at scripture

with new eyes. Much to the chagrin of my fellow progressives, political strategizing doesn't make change happen. Instead, conversion is a bottom-up, one-person-at-a-time process that is ultimately in God's hands.

Time and a deepening faith have shifted the focus of my yet-to-be-recognized ministry. I no longer hop on the merry-go-round of the national church debates, though I deeply respect and support those who are led to do so. The most important gift I have to offer is not my strategic sensibilities for legislative battle, but the imperfect witness of the grace I have received when God places someone in my path. My way of doing justice now is to love mercy by planting seeds of transformation one person at a time—seeds that only God can bring to harvest.