

GOD'S TRANSFORMING POWER

*Sermon by the Rev. Federico I. Aguirre
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Micah 6:6-8
Romans 12:1-8

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God – Micah 6:8 (NIV)

I congratulate and thank the planners of this year's Founders Day for choosing this passage from the book of Micah as the basis for the theme of this week's celebration. It happens to be my very favorite passage not just in the book of Micah but in all of the Old Testament. And I am not alone. There are many preachers and scholars who share my viewpoint for good reason. Many consider it one of the most important statements that God makes because in a few succinct phrases He exhorts the human race about their mission. The key concepts in this passage are justice, mercy and humility before God.

When Micah talks about justice, he is obviously not referring to justice in a court of law. Rather he talks about a justice that is more comprehensive than "criminal justice" or "procedural justice." He talks about social justice, which is concerned with the structures of society and their results. He asks pointedly whether the structures of society are just in their effects. Do they produce a large impoverished class or result in a more equitable distribution of resources? Do they benefit some at the expense of many or serve all equally? Do they produce conflict or peace? Do they destroy or nourish a future?

You see, in the early days, Israel prevented the accumulation of wealth in that everything was shared and ultimately "owned" by God. However, between the 10th and 8th centuries BC, another economic model was introduced, whereby distribution was not equal, and God's ownership not respected. The gap between the rich and poor became wider and wider. Some Israelites were forced into debt in order to keep from starving, and, because of high interest rates, people were driven into virtual slavery. Does that ring a bell?

At this point, I wish to focus on the third part of Micah's exhortation that the Lord requires that we walk humbly before God. To me, that is the most important of God's requirements. You see, it is quite easy to talk about justice and mercy. But it is something else to cast justice and mercy in the context of humility before God. What this passage is saying is that you cannot talk and act justly or love mercy without the proper perspective. It is saying that in everything you do, you make God instead of yourself the center of your life. That is what it means to walk humbly before God.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate my point. I am sure most of you are familiar with the name Jose Maria Sison although some of you here are too young to have actually met him because he burst into the national scene more than forty years ago when some of you were not even born. Now I know that I am revealing my age when I say that he and I were contemporaries. Not only

that. We went to school together at the University of the Philippines and were good friends. At one time or another he and I and our respective girl friends who eventually became our respective wives were classmates in a few courses. In fact it was I who brought him to Silliman to speak for the first time in 1966 when I was a student here at the Divinity School. I understand that there some who have not forgotten what I did because as the saying goes, Silliman has not been the same since then.

Anyway, my story is about an incident that happened at the University of the Philippines in early 1969. At that time I was serving as assistant minister at the UP Protestant Chapel and I happened to visit Joe Ma, as he was fondly called, at the university student center where he and his wife Julie were leading a conference of the leaders of the Kabataang Makabayan. Those of you who are familiar with recent political history know that the late 1960's to early 1970's were rife with activism and there was a lot of talk about social justice within the context of an expected and hoped-for Philippine Revolution. When I saw Joe Ma and Julie, they were outside the door of the assembly room and they looked quite disappointed. I could tell that they had just walked away from a chaotic scene judging from the noise coming from inside. I asked them what happened and it was Julie who answered in Tagalog. She said, "Nagpataasan sila ng ihi." Roughly translated into English, "they had a pissing contest." What happened was that in that room full of young revolutionaries, the big issue that was being hotly debated was who among them was the most revolutionary of all.

"Nagpataasan sila ng ihi." That was in fact my first time to hear that expression but it stuck in my mind because in the weeks and months that followed, I would run into many a group not only here but in the States where I later migrated whereby new similar organizations and movements would reach an impasse and more often than not they would either dissolve or splinter into rival groups within a short time. And why people asked me why, I would answer: Sa pagkat sa kadalasan, wala silang ibang ginawa kundi magpataasan ng ihi. As some of my American friends would say, too many of the leaders had an "I" problem. On such occasions, I would often recall what my mentor here at Silliman said on the subject. The often quoted remark of the late Dr. Paul's Lauby went like this: "It's amazing how many things you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." But going back to that incident at U.P., partly to comfort my two friends and partly because of my own convictions, I said to both of them: "Well, that's human nature and you cannot change it." Obviously I said the wrong thing because he instantly reacted. True to his belief in the emergence of the new man as the Marxist goal, he refused to concede what I said and it was clear that he took it as central to his mission as a good Marxist to change human nature, no less. I look back now and realize that it was the beginning of our parting of ways. We found ourselves at odds over the most fundamental of beliefs.

There is none and there will never be any such thing as the new man in Marxist terms. Marx and Engels are gone and so are Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara to mention just a few. They all eventually passed away still dreaming of their ideal of the perfect future man they were going to help bring about. Today, human nature has not changed very much if at all. But to us, the new man is the same man whom God created in His image, who disobeyed and continues to sin against his Creator but who in the fullness of time was made new by being bestowed the gift of redemption when God sent His Son into the World so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.

That belief is what drives our hope as Christians for the future. It is a belief not in human power but in God's power acting upon us. In our passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, he is essentially saying that God is and should be at the center of everything that you are and do in order to be faithful and effective Christians. Listen to what he says in the first two verses, which I quote from the New Revised version: "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect*". So aside from the word "God" which is mentioned three times in these two verses, the most important word is "transformed." Paul's exhortation involves submitting ourselves to be transformed. Paul recognized that not everybody who came to that congregation that Paul was addressing had God in mind. Therefore, everyone needed to be transformed not by their own will but by the power of God. That is what God does for all of us. He takes us – warts and all. He transforms us. God takes our worldly and selfish desires and makes them holy and in conformity to His will.

That should make us all feel good. At least it does that to me because I know what it is like to have my mind and heart transformed. My wife gets tickled whenever I share this testimony about my life. I was a 16 year old college freshman when I first joined the church at the campus of the University of the Philippines where I went for my undergraduate studies. I confess that at the time God was not central to my mind. I went there and started going back, because I spied a beautiful young lady with long black flowing hair who sang in the soprano section of the choir. And I joined that church and its choir because I wanted to keep an eye on her. At the time we were just a couple of college kids who liked to sing but little did we know that we would eventually marry, start a family, and study and dedicate ourselves to the service of the Lord, myself in preaching and she in music and the arts. I believe it was the transforming power of God working in us that led us to God's service not only in our native country but here in the United States. And I believe that our experience is quite common. If you examine yourselves collectively and individually, many of you may have come here originally, not with God as your central motivation, but rather something more mundane. Did you come here because it has a beautiful and architecturally impressive building? Did you come here because it is the one place where you can socialize with friends and classmates? Did you come here to break the monotony of your schedule? Did you come here because the church infrastructure is perfectly in place and has no more major capital development needs to burden the congregation or so you thought? Did you come here because the congregation is large enough for you? Did you come here because the congregation is small enough for you? Did you come because being a churchgoer is a way to look respectable? Did you come because your family dragged you to church? None of these had anything to do with God. But whatever it is that brought you here, God takes it, transforms it, and makes it holy and acceptable.

God is speaking to us always but more so today because we live in a time of crisis. Now if you think that we have it bad, go back 2000 years to Paul's time when the Christian community was persecuted and hounded like a band of animals. They did not have the kinds of freedoms and human rights that we enjoy and so it was a risk to be a Christian in Paul's day. So the safe thing to do was to either be quiet and invisible or to go along with the majority. At that time it meant pledging complete allegiance to the Roman empire and even worshipping the emperor.

But what does Paul advise in this passage about Christian living in the world? Let's go back to Verse 2 which says: "*Do not be conformed to this world.*" In other words, Paul is exhorting his

readers to live in the world as non-conformists. They are asked to refuse to go along with what is considered politically correct and politically safe. Rather, they are asked to have allegiance only to God who is the Sovereign Lord of all life.

That was a very demanding and even dangerous prescription but did the early Christians hesitate? No, they went on to practice their faith in public and for that they often paid dearly even with their lives. But what emboldened them was their faith that God is ultimately in control of history and that in the fullness of time His judgment would prevail. It was this faith that gave them the courage to face adversity. It is written that at one time when a band of Christians were thrown to the lions or killed by gladiators in the Roman coliseum, the emperor Nero watched with wicked fascination as the Christians knelt in prayer. They looked toward heaven and a strange light shone on their faces. Nero cried out, "What are they looking at? What do they see?" An advisor who had sympathy for the Christians and their courage in the face of death said, reverently, "They see the face of Jesus."

It is tough to practice justice in a world where there is so much injustice. It is tough to practice love in a world where there is so much hatred. It is tough to practice goodness where there is so much evil. It is tough to be optimistic in the face of so much uncertainty.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are confused by today's circumstances, if you feel yourselves losing hope, if you are fearful that things are getting worse with every passing day, if you and others are conjuring the worst possible apocalyptic scenarios and wondering if we are looking at the beginning of the last days, take heart. Our Bible constantly affirms that God is always in control of the future. As sure as He has created the world and everything in it, God has created the instrumentalities and agencies for us to use in achieving and maintaining social order. And despite the imperfections of the state and government owing to our worldly limitations, God does not forsake us. Through the peaks and valleys of our personal, community and national life, He is constantly ahead, creating and transforming us and our institutions for the ultimate good. After all, the God that we worship is the same God who took a bumbling and unwilling fugitive who had killed a man and transformed him into a leader that liberated God's people from the Egyptian pharaoh and led them on the way to the Promised Land. It is the same God who took a shepherd boy who despite becoming one of history's most notorious philanderers developed and transformed him into the greatest king that Israel ever had. It is the same God who took a disciple who faltered in his faith not just once but many times and yet transformed him into the rock upon which the church of Jesus Christ was built.

God is in control. This is the thought that should give us as we celebrate the 108th anniversary of our Alma Mater. God placed us here for a purpose – so that in all circumstances and in all times, we are charged to be faithful in word and in deed to our Lord Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Therefore, in the words of a well-known exhortation, let us then go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no person evil for evil, strengthening the fainthearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted and honoring all people, loving and serving God rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And may God grant blessing upon us all – students, teachers, administrators, staff, alumni and friends of Silliman University, now and forever more. Amen.