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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Epiphany 4

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the first of its kind appeared on television in 1981, and the program had a running with the same TV personality into the early 1990's.

It is still running but over the years it has had different stars.

And from that original show, there have been other such programs.

What am I talking about?

Why, The People's Court, of course, who's original host was Judge Wapner.

We might remember the theme music (hum some of the music).

Yes, The People's Court was the first court television program to use binding arbitration.

Today, in addition to The People's Court, we have other similar shows: Judge Judy, and The Hot Bench, and the like.

Personally, I am not a big fan of such shows. I never really got into them.

Once in a blue moon, I might watch an episode.

But, I bring this up these television court programs, because today, in our reading from Micah, we are invited into the heavenly court room.

(Hum The People's Court theme music.)

Yes, this passage from Micah was for our ancestors long ago the equivalent of The People's Court with Judge Wapner.

And who is the plaintiff in the case? None other than God.

And who is the defendant in the case? The people Israel.

And notice who is playing the jury? Creation itself.

Not the usual players in a courtroom, are they?

And what is the case about? What does God have against his people?

For the text says, "The Lord has a controversy with his people. He will contend with Israel."

And God lays down his case such as to say, "I have been good to you, Israel."

"I brought you up from the land of Egypt."

"I delivered you from slavery."

"I sent you Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam."

God notes as well, that when King Balak of the Moabites, the enemy of the Israelites, tried to persuade the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelite armies, God intervened.

And God provided his presence to his people at Shittim on the one side of the River Jordan, to Gilgal on the side of the Jordan.

In other words, God provided his presence, as the people Israel crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land.

And so God have proven God's self to be faithful over and over and over again, and yet God is upset with God's people.

And so we have this court case. (Hum the music theme from The People's Court.)

God is upset with God's people because the people have been morally reprehensible.

But what have the people done? Why have the people brought on themselves this lawsuit from God?

Well, in particular, Micah describes the crimes of the corrupt officials, both religious and political officials.

Micah attacks those in power who have exploited the people.

Jewish priests, prophets, and judges were self-serving and ethically bankrupt.

Specifically, the authorities in power were coveting the fields, the lands of the farmers, those everyday, common people working the earth.

Those in power coveted the land and seized others' property for their own gain.

And this has God up in a tizzy.

THIS is God's complaint against Israel.

And it is not unfamiliar complaint.

The prophet Amos a generation before depicted God as up in a tizzy, because of the social injustice Amos was witnessing in his time.

In Amos' case, those Israelites buying the produce from farmers were using false balances on the scales, such that the farmers weren't receiving the proper amount for their harvest.

Farmers were being shortchanged.

And this was just one example of injustice exhibited toward the poor and needy in Amos' day.

Jumping ahead some 22/23 centuries, and we can think of the injustice by the Church perpetrated during the Medieval Age.

The Church fleeced its members for money by selling the forgiveness of sins, which is what the reformer Martin Luther was up in arms about, and spoke out against.

And even here in own country in more modern times there has been grave social injustice, such that nation has built up its prosperity on the backs of Africans, a horrible social injustice in its own right.

So, yes, God has a case against his people.

God has had a case innumerable times down through the ages.

It is Judge Wapner over and over again. (Hum the theme of The People's Court.)

PAUSE

And so Micah tells us, God does not want sacrifices of calves.

No, God does not want burnt offerings of rams by the thousands.

God just wants God people to do what is right.

What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8, one of those all-important memory verses in the Bible.

What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Do this, be just, be kind, and God will be pleased, so it would seem.

PAUSE

But there is always, there is always a fine line to be walked here, isn't there?

What do I mean by that?

Well, we have our own trappings of sacrifice today, don't we?

We might not literally sacrifice calves and rams on an altar, but we do offer sacrifice.

We do make a sacrifice of our time by coming to church.

We do make a sacrifice of our financial resources such that we give money to the church.

We do make a sacrifice of our energy and abilities such that we serve on church committees, or help with egg making at the church, or give of ourselves in any number of other ways.

And we have to be careful.

We have to be careful such that we don't fall into that mindset where we think ourselves, "I am good with God because I do these things, because I sacrifice my time, my talent, and my treasure."

We have to be careful not to think that we earn God's good grace because of our sacrifice.

It is easy, so easy to fall into that trap.

And this is the complaint of God.

“I don’t want your sacrifice. I don’t need your sacrifice,” says God.

“But your neighbor does. Your neighbor needs your sacrifice, needs your generosity, your time, your care and support.”

“Your neighbor needs your sacrifice, not I,” says God.

In ancient times, the people of God felt that if they just sacrificed to God, as was required of them, they could behave pretty much as they wanted.

Offer up a burnt offering and you were good with God, and then you could go about treating your neighbor as you wanted.

Steal their land.

Cheat them out of their harvest.

Abuse and use them as you see fit.

That was pretty much the mindset.

But God has a complaint against his people.

This behavior does not sit well with God.

And God is in a tizzy.

What do I require of you, says the Lord, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you God?

PAUSE

Sometimes I wonder if we are no different from our ancestors.

Do we come to church...Do we give our dues to God...Do we participate in congregational life here...because we hope to appease God and win his favor.

Do we think to ourselves, “I’ll do these things, so that I am good with God. And then, I can do as I please with the rest of my life. I need not have to worry about my neighbor nor about his or her welfare.”

Do we ourselves get caught up in that kind of thinking?

If so, we need to be careful, because God has a complaint against us, and God will bring a lawsuit against us.

(Hum the music from The People's Court.)

PAUSE

Coming to church, offering our time, our money, our talent and abilities...these are things we do, not to earn God's favor, but because God has already shown his favor to us.

Our sacrifice is a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

So it is not that we HAVE to sacrifice but we GET to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel, we GET to sacrifice for our neighbor's welfare, and for our own well-being, too.

It is a sacrifice we make because of what God has already done for us.

And really our sacrifice is not a sacrifice, because everything we are, everything we own, it all belongs to God anyway.

PAUSE

My favorite blessing from our Communion Liturgy says as much.

It reads...

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

God has blessed us with our very person, and with the time we have in this world, and with the possessions we claim in life.

Everything we think is ours belongs already to God.

We are on loan from God, so that we just stewards of these things.

And so our sacrifice is just to be good stewards of our person, our time, and our resources.

And we are good stewards of these things if, IF by our lives we do justice, and show kindness, and if we humbly walk with God.

Coming to church, giving of our resources, using our talents in service to God and others, these things feed into that call to do justice and to be kind.

These things focus our attention to live out that call throughout the week, each and every day.

So, yes, coming to church, giving of our resources, serving, these things are necessary, they are abundantly helpful to focus us in our call as God's people.

They are NOT done to make ourselves good with God.

They are NOT a safety net for salvation.

Salvation and acceptance by God are already a done deal.

Again, God doesn't need our sacrifice. But our neighbor does.

So, in the court of public opinion (hum the music theme from The People's Court)...

So, in the court of public opinion, we have to turn the question around.

The Christian author David Otis Fuller is credited with posing THIS question for Christian believers to think about: "If evidence were brought against you for being a Christian would there be enough for a conviction?"

Is there enough evidence—enough kindness attributed to our life, enough justice we have achieved personally, enough humility in our walk with God—such that some plaintiff could say of us, "That one is a Christian. I see it in their life."

Is there enough evidence against us to bring a conviction terms of justice, kindness, and humility?

Is there enough evidence? Amen.