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As best we can ascertain, Micah was a prophet during the 8th Century BCE, around the time of the Neo-Assyrian crisis, when Samaria, the capital city of Israel was destroyed, Jerusalem was besieged, thousands were slain, and many more taken captive. Why had a tragedy of such epic proportions befallen Judah and Israel? According to Micah, Assyria was actually *acting on God's behalf*, disciplining the people for enacting a style of social and economic development that worked against the some very basic ethical and religious norms. As larger estates were being created, it was increasingly difficult to provide for economic justice. People's land was being taken away, high interest rates made it difficult to retain financial independence, and debt slavery was rampant.¹ Does that sound at all familiar?

Both individuals and social structures were held responsible. And not just garden variety political figures and landlords, but, as we hear in today's text, prophets as well. You see, in that time there were many, many seers who claimed to speak for God. Not just Micah and Isaiah, but other individuals who were paid for their efforts and just so happened to deliver precisely what their patrons wanted to hear--consistently good news. It was only when those rosy predictions failed to come true that their true identities as false prophets were revealed. Micah, on the other hand, could proclaim his credentials because, not only did he prophesy for free, but he spoke the painful, unvarnished truth to his people. He named their sins and predicted their demise...and presumably didn't win any popularity contests in the process. A lonely vocation if ever there was one.

¹ Petersen, David L.: *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. p40.

We could use a Micah in our midst today. Certainly the Occupy Wall Street and other spin-off protests around the world are filling some of that void. Yet presidential candidates and many other politicians continue to seem deaf to their cries. They just keep on pushing policies that shelter wealthy individuals and corporations while putting more and more financial burden on the poor and the middle class. Driving a bigger and bigger wedge between the haves and the have nots. Threatening the most basic of safety nets. And this with things already extremely bad: A report released on Thursday by the Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation ranked the United States at 26 out of 30 on a social justice scale based comprised of national poverty, equity, education, health, and intergenerational justice statistics. Only Greece, Chile, Mexico, and Turkey fared worse than the US in that ranking.² To add insult to that injury, the same day the New York Times published this report, a Times Op-Ed piece reported on a 2010 Halloween party thrown by the largest U.S. law firm specializing in mortgage foreclosures. Photos supplied by an anonymous former employee, included one in which two of the partygoers are dressed like homeless people. One holds a bottle of liquor. The other has a sign around her neck that reads: “3rd party squatter. I lost my home and I was never served.” The source said that “I was never served” is meant to mock “the typical excuse” of the homeowner trying to evade a foreclosure proceeding.³ Shameless.

Nevertheless, despite all this evidence that something is very wrong with our country, politicians want to be elected and then re-elected, and corporate America and the wealthy foot the bulk of their campaign budgets. They want to be liked by their colleagues and the constituents who

²http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-78C17ADF-63C112A0/bst_engl/hs.xsl/nachrichten_110205.htm

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/29/opinion/what-the-costumes-reveal.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=halloween,%20foreclosure&st=cse

scream the loudest, and so there is peer pressure in play as well. People are being outrageous, but not in ways that upset the status quo or do anything to advance the cause of the so-called 99%.

Who, then, is in a position to speak the truth and be heard? I would like to think that the Church and other religious institutions are, but even here we encounter some similar issues. Clergy are financially dependent upon the salaries and benefits our congregations pay us. Most of us are not tentmakers like Paul was. Nor do we travel around the country on foot depending upon the kindness of strangers to feed and shelter us as Jesus did. Plus we've got separation of church and state issues to contend with. Basically, we're not exactly in a position to alienate people overly much...

So how about you lay people? I know many of you have boldly spoken—or written--out about local and some broader social issues, and I commend you for that. But I know that, like me, those of you who are still working are also dependent upon your salaries, and this is a small town. If you raise your voices too loudly, your bosses are likely to hear about it. We're all part of community networks that we rely upon for friendship and support of our various causes. We need people, even people with whom we strongly disagree. And we're not looking to make ourselves into targets for vandalism or graffiti either. Yet silence can look like agreement...or even complicity.

Let's face it. On the whole, the Church is nowhere near as edgy as it once was. And I'm not just talking about the Early Church and all the martyrs it produced. How about the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther initiated almost 500 years ago tomorrow? How about the relatively recent Civil Rights era?... To what extent has the Church become just another social institution...and sometimes an irrelevant one at that? I am very proud of the bold stances the

national office of the United Church of Christ has taken over the years. But we are a denomination that is rapidly shrinking in size, and I'm honestly uncertain how loudly our collective voice is being heard outside of our own offices and sanctuaries. Sometimes it can honestly feel like we're just preaching to the choir. And, even at that, there are many potential choir members who do not even darken our doorways. Some because they equate Christianity with something other than progressiveness. Others because they see our social stances but not our faith. And still others because they have not a clue what we stand for. Either that, or they've confused us with the Church of Christ on West Division St.

Something's got to give...Many people from some pretty diverse theological corners are calling for a 21st Century Re-Reformation. Evangelicals and Mainline Liberal Christians alike. Some are responding by producing unconventional emergent and emerging-style worship services. Some of which take place in homes or even on-line, rather than in an actual church building. Some of which are led by ordained ministers and some not. Some are devoting large portions of their buildings to community service. There are endless possibilities. The key is that Christianity--a faith solidly rooted in resurrection and transformation--must itself remain open to change.

We are empowered to adapt to our particular contexts and to whatever the current needs and circumstances might be. Remarkably...or not...it was the early Reformed churches that coined the phrase, "the church reformed, but always needing to be reformed." Or what Baptist theologian A.J. Conyers called "correcting the correction." This may simply mean bringing new sources of inspiration to worship. And not necessarily Powerpoint and praise music. It may well be something far tamer and quieter; something closer to what has been called "ancient-future worship." Or it may mean something somewhat more radical, like experimenting with alternative

church models that take us outside or bring our neighbors in need inside our walls. Or perhaps, at this point in time, it's more about getting ever clearer about how God is moving among us and how we are being called to respond to that movement.

Whatever it is, it will require us to be open-minded, open-hearted, and willing to take certain risks. To overcome meekness and, in the words of Martin Luther, "Sin boldly." To say with Micah, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might." For, as Episcopal priest Matthew Fox stated in his *95 Articles of Faith for a Christianity for the Third Millennium*, "All are called to be prophets which is to interfere with injustice."⁴

Amen.

⁴ <http://www.matthewfox.org/index.php/2010/10/chapter-v-95-theses-or-articles-of-faith-for-a-christianity-for-the-third-millennium/>