

## “Beating Swords into Plowshares: Ending the Violence of Guns and Child Poverty”

Micah 4: 1-5

I shared with Cabinet on Wednesday night that the Children’s Defense Fund, the group that sponsors the National Children’s Sabbath Celebration, that they didn’t exactly pick an easy topic for this year’s conversation when they decided to tackle ending gun violence and child poverty in our nation, two issues that are really very complicated and highly sensitive given the tone of our nation recently.

Now that being said, I will tell you that I knew going into this week, I was not going to give a sermon about guns or gun rights. For one thing, for me, this issue is a political issue. And it is an issue that I think is best decided by our government and lawmakers, not by the church. However, I didn’t feel like I could avoid the issue all together because as part of my job as minister, as proclaimer of the Gospel, and yes as a child advocate, part of my job is to remind us all as a community of faith that we are called to help build up the Kingdom of God for all of God’s children, young and old, to build it up right here on earth each and every day.

So yes, we can all breathe a sigh of relief. This sermon is not about guns and gun owner rights. That’s for the government to decide. But this sermon is about

the Kingdom of God. It is about living out our call as people of faith to become aware of the many ways that we can share the Kingdom of God that is in our midst with all of God's children, young and old. It is about speaking out for justice for all of God's children, recognizing that we are called to do something more to help everyone experience the peace, the love, the grace of God each and every day in our community and in our world.

So, as always when we talk about the Kingdom of God, it is best to start with the Word of God. So to that end, instead of sharing and spending time with all the facts and figures about gun violence and children, I spent most of time this week, meditating on the words from the prophet of Micah. Now, most of us are more familiar with his well known verse: "What Does the Lord Require of You? To seek justice, and love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. I bet all of you are singing that in your heads right now. That's okay because usually, when we talk about Micah, it is this verse that comes to everyone's mind. It is this verse that we associate with his work as one of God's prophets. So, yeah, we are a little surprised not to hear that particular verse this morning and if that wasn't surprise enough, Micah seems to be borrowing another beloved phrase to share with his community back then and to us again today to make his point..

In fact, usually when we hear someone mentioning the notion of beating swords into shovels and spears into plowshares, we tend to think about the prophet

Isaiah and for good reason. Isaiah did use that image to give hope to his community while they were in exile. But we aren't looking at Isaiah. Today we are spending time with Micah and we are hearing him tell us his version of the story. Today we are hearing Micah once again remind us that war and violence do not have the last word. God does.

It truly is a great image, instruments of warfare being turned into instruments of welfare. This image tells us that violence is not how things are going to end, that it is truly possible to embrace the wellness of all of God's children. It is a great image. It's a powerful image. And it should have been what caught my attention this week but it wasn't.

Even though this image of swords being turned into shovels, spears being turned into plowshares is one of my favorite Biblical images, it wasn't where I found the Word of God. Just past this beautiful imagery, I came across the line that said, "No one shall make them afraid." And it stayed with me all week. I kept wondering just what our world would really look like if we did just that, truly lived out this notion in our everyday lives, this notion of no one being afraid, this notion that no one has the power to make others afraid. Just what would our world really look like if that was reality and not just some words on a page?

What would it really look like for so many of God's children who do live in constant fear? What would it look like, if from now on, they had nothing to fear in

their everyday lives? If they could just embrace life? If they could just experience the goodness of life without having to worry? If they could just experience walking down the street without having to constantly look over their shoulder, without wondering and fearing what was just around the next corner, without wondering if they or their children would be gunned down. What would that look like?

I'll admit that it is hard for me to wrap my mind around something like that simply because that peace of mind is what my everyday life looks like. I don't know any differently. I know that I am blessed. I don't know what it means to live in constant fear. I don't have to worry about my children being gunned down as they walk to school. I don't have to worry about drive by shootings in my neighborhood. I know that I am really fortunate to live in a community that loves children. I know that I am really fortunate to have my children surrounded by lots of people who are constantly watching out for them, watching over them. But, even as I say this, I also know that these things, these blessings, of security, of stability of assurance and love, these gifts don't happen for everyone, not even in our own seemingly safe and secure community.

There are people within our state, within our nation, within our world that drive by shootings and gang related deaths are an everyday occurrence. There are people within our state, within our nation, within our world that do worry that their children will be innocent victims, killed in fights that don't even involve them.

And it is not just gun violence that has some people living in constant fear. In our community, in our state, in our nation, in our world, fear is brought on by many things: hunger, poverty, lack of clean water, lack of access to quality medical care, lack of basic needs being met. Fear comes in many forms And unfortunately, there are many in our community, in our state, in our nation, in our world, that fear is a constant companion in their everyday reality.

Fear traps. Fear absorbs. Fear overtakes. Fear drowns out the light until all one can see is darkness.

Yes, I know I am blessed, more than I realize and for that I am thankful. But I am also realistic. I am not as naïve to believe that these tragedies can or will never touch our own community or touch my life. Unfortunately, I know, whether I like to admit it or not, there is always that possibility, simply because of the world we live in. I cannot control every single detail that involves my children and their lives, no matter how hard I may try. They leave my sight. They step out of our house. And all I can do is hope and pray for the best and leave the rest in God's hands. Sure I may not experience violence in my life each and every day but the possibility is there, simply, because of other people's actions, because of other people's decisions. Sure, violence is not a tangible thing in my life but that doesn't mean I don't know it is out there lurking somewhere, outside of my seemingly safe and secure bubble that I have built around my loved ones.

I think my most recent wake up call to this fact was when our children's daycare facility decided to install a security system in response to the school shootings that have been happening across our nation. Forty years, this facility prided itself on having an open door policy where anyone could just walk right in but now, we have to be buzzed in to pick up our kids.

Now Please hear me say. I am not complaining about the security system one bit. My children's safety and well-being is of the utmost importance to me but I will admit that, with just that one letter sent home to all the parents, my little safe and secure bubble burst a bit. I began to wonder about all the "what ifs" that could have happened or could possibly happen to my children if that security system at the daycare was not in place.

But even then, as the "what ifs" filled my mind, I knew that my wonderings are just that: wonderings about the what ifs, the unknowns and knock on wood, that is all that they will ever be. "What ifs", experiences that I wonder about but never have to experience as real.

But for many across our state, across our nation, across our world, these wonderings about the what ifs regarding children's safety are a harsh part of their existence, an awful reality that they have to face each and every day. They don't get the luxury of wondering about these what ifs and knowing that more than likely, they will never come true. Unfortunately, instead of wondering about the

what ifs, some people in our state, in our nation, in our world have to deal with the very real now whats”, all because they happen each and every day of their lives: children are killed, hunger pains all through the day, dirty drinking water, lack of clean clothing, sick children because they couldn’t get access to medical care. The what ifs are real and open the door for fear to be their constant companion in life.

So as I pondered all this and kept hearing Micah’s words, about world where no one shall live in fear, a world where no one has the power to make others afraid, all because God’s Kingdom on earth has become the reality for all, I couldn’t help but become overwhelmed. Did Micah really believe that this, a world free from violence and war, a world free from fear, could actually happen? Did he ever see swords being turned into shovels, spears being turned into plowshares? Did he ever see a world where no one had the power to make others afraid anymore? Did this image become a reality in his lifetime? Well no. We know world history. There has not been a time when the whole world was at peace. At some point, somewhere, throughout all of history, someone has always been fighting with someone else.

So even as I read his words, I wondered why Micah would write such a thing if he never saw it come to fruition? What if his image was just that, some words on a page that would never become reality? Was it even possible for Micah’s vision of God’s peaceable kingdom here on earth to ever become a reality

in my lifetime? In my children's lifetime? In my children's children's lifetime? I'm not sure but I hope so.

And then I knew I had my answer. Micah showed me that it really wasn't about this image actually becoming a reality right here and now. It has and is and will always be about us, as people of faith, holding on to the hope that yes, we will see it become a reality because that is what God promised us. It is about us holding on to the dream. It is about us understanding that God will have the last word always. Because that is what we've experienced in our own lives. We know that love is stronger than fear. We know that light will drive out the darkness. We know that God will overcome in the end. That's what matters. That's what gives us passion to continue to work to make the Kingdom of God a reality for all of God's children, young and old. We know love will win in the end.

Yes, one day, we aren't sure when that will be, this notion of God's peaceable Kingdom will become a reality and yes, I do hope that I am around to see it happen. But if not, I must not give up hope. We must not give up hope. We can't stop working towards that dream. We must not give up on the vision. The Kingdom of God is too important for us to do so.

Because "if we cannot dream of a common world community with all its members living in peace, we will have misunderstood the past, miscalculated the

present and worst off, we will have ignored the future. We will have allowed fear to win. We will have allowed the darkness to overtake us.

So, as we talk about Children's Sabbath, as we talk about taking care of the children in our community, in our nation and in the world, we need to let go of this false sense of security that tells us we are okay just because my kids are safe, just because your kids or grandkids are safe and taken care of in this world.

Here is the truth: The Kingdom of God is not about individuals. It is about the community as a whole. My kids are not truly safe and secure until all of God's children are safe and secure and well taken care of in their lives. My kids are not truly living without fear until all of God's children are not having fear as their constant companion in their daily lives. I'm not trying to scare us but the reality is the Kingdom of God has never been just about us. It has always been about all the children of God, living in peace, living in love, living in grace.

No one should ever be afraid. No one should ever have the power to make others afraid. The very thought goes against the very nature of the Kingdom of God. Yes, I realize that we live in a very different world than we did just a year ago, or five years ago, or even ten years ago. Certain events have changed our society for better and for worse.

But I simply cannot believe or accept that we as the Body of Christ are okay with people living in constant fear each and every day. That is not okay.

But as I read the news reports and as I glanced through the facts and figures shared by the Children's Defense Fund, that is exactly the message that is being sent, all because our churches are silent.

Today alone, 16 million children will suffer the violence from poverty and seven children and teens will be killed by guns.

It is simply not enough for us to say that our kids are okay, that our kids are safe and secure, that our kids are protected. The Kingdom of God is not about individuals. It is about community. It is about relationships. It is about caring for one another, loving one another, just as God has cared for us and loved all of us.

So really I am not preaching a sermon about guns. I am just doing my job as a preacher, as a proclaimer of the Gospel. I am just doing my job as a child advocate. It is and has always been about the Kingdom of God. It is and has always been about what would happen for all of God's people today if we truly did allow love and grace, not fear and hate, if we allowed love and grace to be what ruled our hearts and our interactions with one another.

So I promise this sermon really is just my wonderings about what our world would look like if all nations really did quit fighting one another, and if all nations turned our swords into shovels, turned our spears into rakes and hoes. We could clean up a lot of messes around here. We could bring beauty out of the chaos. We could use those shovels to dig wells for clean water or set poles for playgrounds.

We could use those rakes and hoes to grow garden of fresh vegetables or reclaim empty lots for community gathering space. We could do a lot of Kingdom work right here in our own community.

So I promise, regardless of what the sermon title may say, this sermon really is about living out the dream, living out the vision, living out the hope that one day no one shall ever be able make God's children afraid every again.

May we constantly work until that hope becomes a reality. Amen.