

“In Whose Eyes?”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Judges 17:1-13  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
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In case you didn't learn this story in Sunday School, let's do a quick recap: A woman's silver is stolen. She utters a curse aloud, perhaps not knowing the thief is standing within earshot. It must have been some hell of a curse because the thief is sufficiently scared into returning the silver. When the thief, that is, her son, returns the money, she responds with blessings. Like a parent blinded by love for her children, she does not hold her son accountable for his actions. She praises him like a hero. (I am tempted to judge her for that, but I realize I say, “Good job, honey!” every time my kid poops or burps, so maybe I should reserve judgment.)

Anyway, she cries out, “The Lord bless you, my son!” and then she takes two hundred of the eleven hundred pieces of silver and turns them into an idol, because, well, who knows why, but that is what she does. Her son, Micah, is enthusiastic about this. I mean, he has a shrine. He makes an ephod and some household gods. He needs a priest, so naturally, he installs one of his sons, I assume because it was convenient. The narrator reports—and this is important—“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

The story continues. A wandering Levite shows up at Micah's doorstep looking for a place to stay. Micah offers, “Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a set of clothes, and your living.” Ten pieces of silver a year puts it into perspective just how much Micah stole from his mother when he took eleven hundred pieces. The Levite agrees to stay and Micah assumes, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, because the Levite has become my priest.”

And thus concludes chapter seventeen. Weird story, right? Why is it even in the Bible? What's the point? While you may have never heard much about this story before, it represents a significant turning point in the book of Judges. Throughout the book, we find this repeated refrain: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” But in chapter seventeen, the description changes. “All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The Lord is no longer a part of it; it's as if God isn't even watching. Like when Jesus dies on a cross, perhaps God cannot even bear to look it's so bad. Or perhaps the people have simply forgotten that God is watching.

The story of Micah, his mother, and the Levite, though strange, serves as an illustration of the point—“All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Micah, motivated I assume by greed, steals from his own mother. When he hears her curse, he returns the money, this time I assume he is motivated by fear of the curse. In other words, Micah looks out for Micah.

Then he and his mother begin a practice of worship—only none of it makes any sense. They make an idol, Micah appoints his own son priest, but then hires a Levite to do the job when he happens to wander by. The whole thing feels willy-nilly, unplanned, and unexamined. They just

did what was right in their own eyes, you might say. Micah, though, believes God will prosper him for it.

Only, things do not unfold quite the way Micah expects. If you keep reading into chapter 18, the tribe of Dan is on the lookout for some good land. They send spies to explore the land and while they are traveling, they stay with Micah. They seem to know the Levite who has become priest to Micah, so they ask him what he is doing and who brought him there. Usually we think of priests as called by God, but this priest appears to be as willy-nilly about things as Micah. He answers their questions—I imagine with a shrug—saying, “Micah did such and such for me, and hired me, and I have become his priest.” The Danite spies then want the Levite to inquire of God whether their mission will succeed. Without actually inquiring of God or even pausing to think about it, the Levite replies, “Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord.” Interesting choice of words—“eye of the Lord”—isn’t it, since everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes?

The spies of the Danite clan then discover the city of Laish, where, the text says, “They observed the people who were there living securely . . . quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing on earth, and possessing wealth.” And so eventually six hundred armed men from the Danite clan march to Laish. Three times the narrator tells us the people of Laish are unsuspecting as if to drive home the point that these people were minding their own business and causing no harm.

On their way to overtake Laish, the Danites again stop at Micah’s house, but this time they aim to take his idol. The Levite priest asks them what they are doing, but they reason with them, “Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to an entire tribe and clan?” And with that, he accepts their offer, steals the idol and ephod himself and goes with the Danites.

Micah attempts to chase after them, and they turn and ask, “What is the matter?” He replies, “You take my gods that I made, and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How can you ask me, ‘What is the matter?’” But the Danites reply that Micah had better not raise his voice, or else some “hot-tempered fellows” will attack you and you’ll lose more than your little idols, Micah. You’ll lose your life and the lives of your household. When Micah sees that they are too strong and he cannot win, he turns and goes back. Ironically, the thief returns home a victim of theft. The silver his mother made into an idol because her money was returned is now taken from them both.

Meanwhile, the text reports, the Danites “having taken what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, put them to the sword, and burned down the city.”

Why is this story in our Bible? Placed near the end of Judges, it is a picture of how willy-nilly and unfocused the people have become. The escapades with the silver idol may sound silly and far removed from our lives today, but is it really so different from our own world? Wealth drives Micah, drives his mother, drives the Levite, drives the Danites to attack Laish. In the story religion appears to be made up on a whim and even the priest has no moral center, no grounding. God’s name is used to sanction the robbery of an entire city, but God makes no real appearance

in the story except on the lips of men attempting to justify violence. Does this sound far-fetched or familiar to you? God's name used in vain to sanctify acts of terror and greed?

The line that appears in v. 6 of story, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" is the same exact line with which the book of Judges ends. Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Chapters 19, 20, and 21 of Judges are some of the darkest, most disturbing stories in all of Scripture. Micah's story is the precursor to true horror. He is like the warning light no one heeds. There is danger ahead, but there is no relationship with God to slow the tide. There is only this relationship to an idol and the worship of wealth. Every facet of the story centers on what someone can get for themselves. Everyone did as they saw fit . . . there was no Higher Power, no point of focus, no gravity, no Center. From beginning to end, decisions are rash, haphazard, and self-absorbed.

In the context of the Bible, these selfish stories serve a distinct purpose. The book of Judges is intended to set us up for the introduction of the Israelite monarchy. It's not just that "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The narrator says quite often, "There was no king in Israel." By the end of the book, you are desperate as a reader for somebody to bring order to the chaos, hope to the despair, humanity to the inhumane, and leadership to the anarchy. The end of Judges is the perfect segue into the book of 1 Samuel and the eventual kingship of David.

Of course, if we zoom out even further, in the wider context of the whole Bible, kingship creates more problems than it solves. Some kings are good, but some are bad, and some kings are *really* bad. People thought kings would be an upgrade from the judges. I mean, if your bar is Samson, yeah, okay, but that's a pretty low bar. Kings, it turns out, are not the solution.

It is worth noting that in the book of Samuel, a king is not God's idea of an answer. It is the people who demand a king. God tries to warn them through the prophet Samuel that kings will be greedy and will take, take, take, but the people do not listen. When times are chaotic and painful, people crave order, crave authority, crave simplicity. Fear tells them they need a savior in the form of a warrior, a king, a fighter.

We see these fears at work in our culture today. Sometimes people look to a particular personality to lead them; sometimes to an airtight philosophy of some kind. An especially popular choice is the king called Fundamentalism. People look to this king to rule over them and make all things right, simple, black and white. Understandably they are afraid of what happens when everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and so they gravitate towards what feels secure.

But where does that leave us? A congregation like ours, a church that has rejected fundamentalism—what is our moral center, our guiding vision? Do we have one? Our type of Christianity in our context means we are often required to be on the defensive, so often asked to explain ourselves, to defend our identity as believers, as church. We get to where we are more familiar with what we have rejected than what we have embraced. We are more familiar with the wounds of fundamentalism and patriarchy and extremism than we are with the healing power of community and Christian love. We've spent more years recovering from fundamentalism than discovering what it is that grounds us. We've had to fight so hard to shed ourselves of toxic

authoritarianism. But where does that leave us? With the same willy-nilly freelance religion of Micah and his mother, the Levite and the Danites? Do we all just do what is right in our own eyes? Is that what it means to be “progressive”? Are our critics right about us? We just drift along with the changing seasons of the culture?

I would like to suggest no, our faith is deeper and truer and purer than that. It can be challenging to hold onto faith when you are someone who is open to questions, open to doubt and uncertainty, open to criticisms about how religion has done real damage to people, because the fundamentalist world of Christianity wants to tell you that you’re a loser. You’re doing it wrong. You’re going to hell. You need to repent. Your rejection of certainty is a rejection of the faith. You just do whatever you want, whatever you think is right, and call it a faith.

But this is not true about you, my friends. You are not motivated by greed, by wealth, or by security. You are motivated by love. Love is a very different driving force than that which drove Micah or the Danites. You have rejected the king called Fundamentalism, not because you want to be king, but because Christ wasn’t a fundamentalist, and we are not bound to follow any authority but Jesus. Our claim is not that Christianity—the religion—is our center. Our claim is that the person of Christ is our clearest view of God and when in doubt about who God is or what God wants, we look to Jesus. Every time. The person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, is our vision, our center, our ground of being.

In Christ we are free to ask questions. In Christ we are free to let the stories of the marginalized and oppressed call into question our own limited understanding of how the world works. In Christ we are free to keep working out our faith, to admit that we don’t have all the answers, and we could be wrong about some of the very things we hold so dear. In Christ we are free to wander and to wonder. In Christ we are free to love our neighbor—I mean really love them—and to listen. In Christ we are free to be unafraid of science, research, and data. In Christ we are free to stand up to abuse. In Christ we are free to relax into grace, knowing that it God who carries us, defends us, preserves us and not the other way around. In Christ we are free not to be God’s army but God’s children. In Christ we are free to let God be God and ourselves be human. In Christ we are free to examine our hearts and repent of our sins, not because God is harsh but because God is good and repentance is our ticket to liberation. In Christ we are free to examine our beliefs and allow them to change over time, because it is Christ and not a creed who holds us and keeps us.

Friends, it is inevitable that sometimes we are the problem because we’re human and we make mistakes, and I hope we will always be open to learning where we have contributed to the world’s pain. But don’t let anyone tell you that it is your commitment to love and mercy that is the problem, because that is never true. They crucified Christ for being love in the world, but that didn’t make them right. It just made them violent.

I cannot comfort you by telling you are absolutely right about your beliefs, because that would just be another form of fundamentalism, albeit on the other end of the spectrum. I can comfort you by telling you that you are loved by God, no matter what, and that it is good and holy that you have prioritized love in your own understanding of faith. I can tell you that uncertainty is sacred because it means you are humble enough to keep listening. I can tell you that

fundamentalism is not the answer to fear, and that your recovery from toxic authoritarianism is good and righteous work, and though it is hard, it is worth it. I can tell you that there is more to life than what has wounded you, even though sometimes the pain is so deep you cannot see the More-ness. I can tell you that the trauma many of you have experienced at the hands of religion is real. You are not being crazy or dramatic, and you are worthy of healing. I cannot tell you if you are right about things, because I am not your god or your savior, your king or your judge. But by the grace of God, I can be a medium of that Love that knows no bounds, that is forever and always yours for the taking. I can tell you that in God's eyes, you are a beloved child, and God has not stopped seeing you. Amen.