

“It's Surely to Their Credit”

a sermon on Micah 6:8 and The West Wing

by Meghann Robern
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Good morning.

Once upon a time, when I was working my way through seminary application essay questions, one in particular stood out among the rest: Name five works of art—basically any kind of human creation—that have inspired your path to ministry. What seems like an easy question ended up consuming me for days; I'm the daughter of musicians, have a degree in creative writing, I was leaving a career in film and television... and they wanted me to pick just five. I spent hours meditating on all my favourite things, finally putting down on paper why these creations had stuck with me and how they had influenced my life to its current direction. In the final submission, tucked in between *The Other Bible* and *The Vicar of Dibley*, was *The West Wing*. Seven seasons, one hundred and fifty-five episodes, and it's an epic that my husband and I rewatch from beginning to end at some point every year. I realized that we feel compelled to return to these characters over and over again, even after we know what's coming, because they are useful. They are a common ground for spiritual direction that appeals to me, the theist, and my husband, the atheist. For me, they are the epitome of one of Unitarian Universalism's favourite pericopes: The Book of Micah, chapter 6, verse 8.

“Listen here, mortal: God has already made abundantly clear what 'good' is, and what YHWH needs from you: simply to do justice, love kindness, and humbly walk with your God.” That's the translation from *The Inclusive Bible*, which is, frankly, still not inclusive enough for the likes of me. Micah is the only prophet who recalls Miriam to her proper place of power with her brothers Aaron and Moses, and so in his spirit of fighting the conventional status quo, I choose to take a few liberties with the common translations that hold on to traditional exclusionary language.

Mortal is the translation of “adam”, which is not a reference to the male character in Genesis, but the mud given life by breath. It means human. We are, all of us, everywhere on the gender identity spectrum, “adam”. “God” is the translation of “elohim”, a Hebrew word that is gramatically PLURAL and FEMININE. It's linked to concepts of greatness and power. It requires holding two seemingly

conflicting things in tension to see the whole. It is multiple in definition, and singular in meaning... much like Unitarian Universalism. And finally, there is YHWH, typically, and unfortunately, translated as "Lord". In reality, a concept beyond human form, much less our spectrum of gender. One of my professors also teaches that when the vowels that we force into our modern pronunciation, the AH, and the EH, are removed, and our limited human mouths attempt to pronounce JUST the Hebrew letters... it sounds like a breath. The same breath that separates mortals from mud. So at its root, without the baggage laid upon it by centuries of patriarchy and abuse of power, the holy element that Micah says guides us in what is good is not a Lord, but is the breath of evolution, the physical act of living itself.

So *my* translation of Micah 6:8 says this: "Listen, human. The greatness of the world, in all of its multiplicity, has made clear what is good and what the lives of the living need from you: to do justice; to love kindness; and to walk humbly with the multitudes on a singular path."

Now I don't know about you, but when I hear THAT, I say "Amen," "Hail" to the Gods, and "Where can I get my yellow t-shirt?" But the reality of living that kind of life, day in and day out, is struggle even for the best of us. The very multitudes that make up the holiness of the universe lend themselves to a constantly shifting set of values and ethics. What was the best choice in a situation five years ago may not be the right one today. What helps us make those decisions are the stories we hear in our lives. They tell us where we've come from and where we're going. They warn us about those who are toxic to the universe, and show us those whom we might aspire to be like. Once upon a time, in our country's predominately Christian heritage, those stories came from the Christian Bible. But our increasingly pluralistic society requires us to find a new common ground of stories that can guide us as part of a larger, inclusive community. I left my career as a screenwriter not because I didn't want to be a storyteller anymore, but because the industry itself was keeping me from telling the stories that would change people's lives for the better. For me, stories are the essence of what it means to be human and to make connections with each other, to sustain the interdependent web. For me, stories that teach us

about each other and ourselves are always holy, and that's why I'm a UU.

People laugh when they hear that Jedi is starting to appear on the population census of countries like the UK and the US, but as UUs we understand holy scripture to be the stories of a community that have withstood the test of time, the ones that get told over and over again, the ones that formed us in childhood. One of my strongest memories is watching a Return of the Jedi over and over again, obsessed with Princess Leia and how she could go from leader to soldier to sister to lover. She was one of the stories that taught me the multiplicity of my identity as a woman. Now I share her with my daughter, and my son, so he will know women are more than objects to be won and possessed.

So what about *The West Wing*? What is it that my family takes from the show, and why do I think its message is important to Unitarian Universalism? The answer is privilege, and how these characters use it to affirm and promote our second principle: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; in this principle our link to the prophet Micah is clear: 1) doing justice IS justice; 2) walking humbly with others is recognizing equality; and 3) loving kindness is making compassion a way of life.

There's Debbie Fiderer. She's an offscreen character in the very first episode who sends Charlie Young, a young boy of colour, up to the Deputy Chief of Staff for the position of body man to the President. He had come in for a messenger job, trying to support himself and his younger sister, and Debbie saw something in him that deserved more. She used the privilege of her position to level his playing field. All she did was give him the same chance as the other boys, with better connections, who were also up for the position, and Charlie proved himself equal to the task. It's not until the end of season three, when we see her ONSCREEN for the first time, that we learn she was fired for recommending Charlie over the white son of a large donor to the Democratic Party. She was rendered powerless by someone who disagreed with her decision to do the right thing, to be a force for good in the world with the resources at her disposal. Three years later, it's Charlie's turn to do justice, and he pushes hard for her to get a position as the President's executive secretary. He uses his privilege of

position to bring her back again and again, more than any of the other candidates, until the President can see her true worth.

When in your life have you had the opportunity to lift someone up? Would you still have done it if it cost you your job? The food on your table? Even three years after she was fired, and spent that time wandering aimlessly trying to recover from such a devastating blow—would you hire someone who was FIRED and not let go from the White House—she knows she did the right thing and does not regret it. I don't think I would have had the strength of Debbie Fiderer, and I remember her when I am confronted with my comfort at the expense of someone else's need.

There's Ainsley Hayes, the Republican who pummels a Democratic White House staffer in a debate on live television and is subsequently asked by the President to join the Counsel's office. All her Republican friends think it's a joke, and call everyone who works in the Democratic administration useless. But Ainsley can see beyond the boundaries that humans create in politics and she understands that the parties are both conflicting and complementary at the same time, like the elohim of the prophets. She accepts the job despite the ridicule of her community, following the call to work for a greater good. And when she gets there, she is treated horribly. Not only do most of the Democrats share the bigoted attitude of her Republican friends, but sexism also comes into play when her intellectual prowess and documented accomplishments are dismissed out of hand because she is “blonde”, “leggy,” and a “sex kitten.” Through each incident, she consistently plays the pacifist and mediator, always trying to find a way out that will not leave a wound. Even when a bouquet of dead flowers with a card that has a gendered slur written on it is left in her office, she refuses to reveal who she thinks may have done it. In the end, it is the Sam Seaborn, the man whom she embarrassed on television, who figures out the truth and uses HIS privilege of gender and power as a senior staffer to stop the abuse—he fires the men responsible. Ainsley consistently demonstrates loving others with kindness, and it's her example that brings her new coworkers past their bigotry and into a coexistence with someone who

thinks radically different from them when it comes to politics and policy, but whom they know shares the same goal of a better community that serves all instead of just some.

When was the last time you stepped out of your comfort zone to see what the world needs outside your bubble? Have you ever felt a pull to something for which your family, your friends, judged you, and others, harshly? What would you do in the face of such isolation? Ainsley teaches me that the path of justice, compassion, and equity is not always easy, or kind, and that without a deep, faithful dedication to working for good, we cannot push through to the other side of cruelty and oppression.

And then there's the episode about Galileo V, an unmanned NASA spacecraft headed for Mars. The White House staff is hosting a panel of experts to field questions from 60,000 elementary students from all over the country. It's a story not only about celebrating human innovation, but the necessity of having a unifying vision, a dream to which all can aspire. If you saw any of the footage of the 50th anniversary march on Washington yesterday, I'm sure you can understand. Since this is the main plot of the episode, of course they lose contact with the spacecraft during its landing. However, while other shows would make the moral of the story about persevering through problem solving and accomplishment, eventually repairing the craft in the nick of time, Galileo V remains dark. Everyone is disappointed, President Bartlet is despondent. In the end, however, it's CJ Cregg, who suggests that it's just as important for the children to see failure as it is to see success. The lesson is not that hard work will always win, but that achieving the goal will always require hard work, especially when the inevitable failures and setbacks get in the way. They go ahead with the children's program to show them that sometimes, the people with the most things in their favour make mistakes, and that the only way to keep moving forward in the unifying vision is to say "I'm sorry, I got it wrong, and we're going to figure out how to be better."

I have lived a very blessed life. I have never gone hungry. I have never been without access to a

roof over my head. I have never had insults slung at me for the colour of my skin. While I know the terror of extended unemployment, especially when there are dependent children, the last resort solution still included food and shelter for me and my kids. This consistent baseline for survival, upon which I can always rely, is due to the hard work of my parents, not me. I am steeped in privilege, and am constantly trying to see outside of it, to see how I can use it for good... and to see how much of it I need to sacrifice in order to dismantle oppressive systems. The hard part about privilege is not living with it; it's rising above it and moving beyond it to make sure those who are born without privilege are given the same sense of inherent worth and dignity.

But rising above and moving beyond, especially when others are living with so much hatred and suffering, is tricky at best and disastrous at worst. The characters in *The West Wing* are some of the wealthiest and most educated people in the history of all television, not to mention the fictional universe they exist in. A majority of them are male. The cast is predominately white for all seven seasons. The show is not without its issues when it comes to embedded racism, sexism, etc. And yet, when word got out that I was going to preach about it, I was bombarded with comments from people suggesting particular episodes, specific scenes, larger character arcs that had all had a significant effect on their lives.

The show speaks to our humanity because it gives us complex stories that ask hard questions and shows us equally complex but caring characters who spend their days trying to navigate their flaws in the name of making their world a better place. Instead of ignoring their overwhelming privilege, they put it to work shifting power dynamics for balance instead of continued oppression. Even more importantly, they don't always succeed, and we see how they survive the fallout to fight another day. We see how they listen, and learn, when they inadvertently allow their privilege to hurt others. We see how they find the resolve to keep doing justice, loving kindness, and walking with humility in the name of a greater good, even when it seems to be too exhausting and too overwhelming. This is what the best

stories do, whether they come from scripture, like the Book of Micah, or a script, like *The West Wing*. They teach us how to be better human beings, and how to be better to each other and the world in which we live and breathe.