

Do Justice...Kindness

Micah 6:1-8

There is a television game show where the contestant is given the answer and they have to come up with the question. The answer in our text is: “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. The question is: “What does the Lord require of you?” In the eighth century BCE, the prophet Micah asked this question, and the response given remains at the heart of right relationship with God, with humankind, and with all other communities of life on the planet. In eight verses, the poet describes the experience of a long-suffering God who remains faithful to an unfaithful people for whom the prophet makes intercession. The passage consists of a series of speeches that implore rather than accuse, a people chosen by God (Deut. 7:7)—a people entrusted with Torah who now are guilty of transgression (see Mic. 1-3).

The setting for Micah 6:1-8 is a courtroom. In the first verses (1-2) the poet makes clear that God has a "controversy" with the people and intends to "contend" with them. We would expect an expression of righteous anger on the part of God, but instead, words of heartfelt bewilderment and plea are proclaimed (vv. 3-5).

The relationship between Israel and God is an intimate one. God calls them "my people." God asks two poignant questions: what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? God commands, "Answer me." God reminds them of the exodus event (v. 4), how God heard their prayers and miraculously brought them out of Egyptian slavery;, and the Balak-Balaam encounter (v. 5), when the king of Moab wanted them cursed, but which resulted in Balaam providing Israel with a great blessing on the eve before the people entered into the promised land (see

Num. 22-24). The people seem to have forgotten their "story" and have forgotten their saving God. The people have fallen out of "right" relationship with their God and with one another because of their forgetfulness. They no longer seem to be centered on or in their God. Throughout Israel's history, God had always remembered the people and the covenant made with them (Gen. 8:1; 30:22; Exod. 2:24; 6:5), and the people have been told again and again to remember their God and all God's wondrous ways and deeds (Deut. 8:18-20). Now God calls on the people to "remember" once again. This remembering will be their starting point back to "right relationship."

Unfortunately the response to God's questions, and demand for an answer seems to me to come in the form of sarcasm. The prophet Micah, humble, self-reflective, and penitential, raised three soul-searching questions. Each question reflecting a willingness to offer some sort of sacrifice for the sake of one's sin.

The list of sacrifices reflects Israel's ancient tradition. Whole burnt offerings were the typical daily offering at the temple. These offerings maintained the relationship between the Israelites and God. An escalating list of potential offerings is offered (v. 6-7). Burnt offerings? Calves a year old? Thousands of rams? Ten thousands of rivers of oil? My firstborn? But the suggestion of sacrificing one's own firstborn was forbidden in ancient Israel and Judah (see, e.g., Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10). It is true in times of crisis, this type of sacrifice seems, on occasion, to have occurred. Human sacrifice did take place in the Canaanite religion. Elsewhere in the OT, God expresses divine outrage at the practice of sacrificing the firstborn because they were "God's" children (Deut. 32:16-19; Ezek. 16:21).

God does not ask for sacrifices that bankrupt us or give our children for our sins. What God requires is for one to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly

with God. Only when one walks humbly with God will one come to learn and understand how to do justice and love kindness.

Theologically, *justice* is identified with the nature of God (Isa. 30:18) and is an activity of God (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 9:4). Justice is a transformative virtue that seeks to establish or restore community, while aiming to balance personal good with the common good. Three types of justice include (1) commutative justice, which focuses on relationships between members of the community; (2) distributive justice, which functions to ensure the equitable distribution of goods, benefits, and burdens of a community; and (3) social justice, which affects the social order necessary for distributive justice. *To love kindness* involves both affection and ethical love of neighbor and fidelity to covenant and law. *To walk humbly with God* implies an attitude of reverence and openness, coupled with a sense of personal integrity, morality, and honesty. God's people are called to godliness and to live out the fullness of justice and love.

The people seemed to be able to “talk the talk” but not “walk the walk.” The “talk” that Micah critiques in this eighth-century BCE is the exclusive attention paid to the practices of religious faith, without the ethical obedience that faith in *YHWH* requires. “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?” (v. 6). Micah's answer, of course, is that none of these symbols of sacrifice pleases God when they are stripped from the context that gives them meaning. God desires more than empty words. God desires justice that is measured by how well the most vulnerable fare in the community, a loyal love (*hesed*) that is commensurate with the kind of loyal love that God has shown toward Israel.

Micah's judgment is that the high religious claims of the urban elites of Jerusalem are not commensurate with the ethical obedience that *YHWH* requires. So offerings are made and religious practices are followed, while “aggressive land

practices" and "exploitative policies (like land grubs, modern day slavery, immigration, sub-standard wages and, movement of the undesirable people into prison) that generate wealth at the expense of the vulnerable" continue.

This text emerged from God's deep disappointment in the people, who had failed to fashion the kind of just community envisioned by the God who liberates people from political and economic bondage. The people of God have been put on trial in this text. God has already outlined the specifics of the charge: the powerful "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away" (2:2); they "tear the skin off my people" (3:2); they send violence on the poor (3:5); the political leaders take bribes, and the religious leaders sell out for money (3:11). By the time Micah poses his rhetorical question in verse 8, an indictment has already been handed down. Israel is on the defensive.

We are like Israel, this kind of assault on the people ought to evoke confession from the church. Often, like the Israelites whom Micah confronts, we remove language from the context that gives it meaning. This text is a challenge to do justice as part of our worship experience, and to do worship with our acts of justice. We forget the "controversy" that the Lord has with the people prior to the chosen snippet of text and conveniently ignore the judgment that immediately follows it. This temptation is great for the North American church. **Andrew Foster Connors** However, we must not be afraid to call ourselves to lives of justice, kindness and humility.

The early church fathers interpreted Micah 6:1-8 in a variety of ways. Cyril emphasizes God's compassion. Tertullian states that God expects people to act with the same divine mercy and compassion that have been bestowed upon them. Both Theodore of Mopsuestia and Augustine note that the love of God, the love of

neighbor, and the offering of self in loving service to one another are far superior to any other sacrifice or burnt offering.

In sum, the poet has proclaimed a prophetic message that attests to God's deep and abiding love, while providing God's people with a proscriptio for "God's will," "right relationship," and the full flourishing of the common good. Given the scientific fact that all of creation is part of one unified web of life, the practice of justice and love now needs to embrace both human and nonhuman life, and the humble walk with God is a walk of holy reverence and awe across the planet, with people being attuned to and learning from the divine Spirit that pulsates at the heart of all. **Carol J. Dempsey**

Seven hundred years before Christ, Israel was in the middle of a revival. The temple was crowded. Giving was over budget for the first time in years, but Micah knew that something was wrong. Israel was arrogant and uncaring.

The prophet pictured God charging Israel with a crime and taking them to court (v. 1). God calls the mountains, the hills, and the foundations of the earth as witnesses for the prosecution. God's accusation is that they are selfish people. They have forgotten God's generosity. God loved Israel, brought them out of slavery, and gave them a home. God speaks in pleading tones, as a parent to a child who ignores the parent's love.

After they hear the accusation, the people, as usual, miss the point: "God, what more could you possibly want from us? Do you want more sacrifices, more expensive livestock? How about a thousand sheep? Just how religious can we be?" (vv. 6-7)

They are religious, but their idea of what religion means is far from God's hopes for them. They think that religion consists of worshiping "correctly" and staying away from those who do not.

"What does God want?" the prophet asks. God wants us to do justice (v. 8)—to be a voice for oppressed persons, unprotected persons, widows, and foreigners, and to fight for the rights of persons with disabilities, minorities, elderly persons, poor persons, and every person treated as less than God's child.

God wants us to love kindness. The Hebrew word *hesed* means God's loving-kindness. We respond to God's love by sharing it with others.

We are to walk humbly with God: listening for God's voice wherever God may be heard; listening to Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists; learning how other people make sense of their lives; thoughtfully examining what it means to live with faith.

We will be more faithful Christians, not if we can refute every idea that is not Christian, but if we can affirm the truth and keep searching. We should not agree with everything, but we should recognize that Christians have much to learn as well as much to offer. We should find ways to say, "I have something I want to share with you, and you have something I hope you will share with me."

Some people think that hearing other viewpoints will lead us to lose our faith, but that is not true for most of us. We become more mature Christians when we see that the great religions struggle with things that matter, that each expresses a real human experience, and that each deserves attention for the wisdom it offers the rest of humanity.

Could it be that whether we have the right answers is less important to God than whether we show compassion? Is that what Micah says?

Christians should cling to the conviction that what we believe comes closest to truth, hold to the story we have been given, test it, doubt it, try it again, believe it passionately, share it, and celebrate it.

In a world of countless religions, what should we do? We should do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. **Brett Younger**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.