

What Does the Lord Require of Us?
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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14:48

What Does the Lord Require of You?
Micah 6:1-8

This morning we get one of the Top 5 verses in the Bible in terms of popularity. It is not the scripture verse assigned for today but instead one that Devin has chosen to shape the Educational ministries this year.

What does the Lord require of you?
Seek justice
Love mercy
Walk humbly with your God

What Micah says in three verses, Jesus later says in two: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. On this stands the entirety of the law and commandments.

So who was Micah? We know just a little bit about him. We know that he was one of the twelve “minor prophets” in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Minor not because of importance, but these are twelve short-winded prophets. Each prophet is only a few chapters long. All these twelve shorter prophets could fit on one scroll in ancient days.

Micah is a little book, only seven chapters long. We know that Micah was a contemporary of Hosea, Isaiah, and Amos and Micah said similar things that these prophets said. So similar that scholars wonder if they knew each other or had a common source.

However, we also know that Micah was from a small village, Moresheth, and was a prophet who spoke for the poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of the powerful landlords. Micah was the voice of the worker and that of common everyday people. He saw the injustice that was going on in society, was quite willing to name them by their right name and felt called to address the ones in power and to speak against evils that were no longer tolerable. This makes him a bit different. The “country boy” prophet if you will. The workers’ prophet. The voice calling from a wilderness of corruption and greed and poverty and suffering. (textweek.com)

What does God require of you? Micah is so very clear.
Seek justice.
Love kindness, or more accurately, love mercy.
Walk humbly with your God.

Seek justice. This one is first. Both first on the list and first in importance according to Micah’s words. Also, I think this one is hardest in many ways.

Seeking justice is hard, messy, conflictual work. It means challenging status quo, changing things especially for the least and lost. Jesus was in the midst of it all the time. It is truly what got him killed. It asks a lot of it.

And it frankly is political. Not partisan. Not lifting up one candidate or political party over another, but political because it challenges the way people are treated, the ways laws are set up. And that is by definition political. In Micah’s day, in Jesus day, in our day.

To seek justice is to act on behalf of others to change the system. I think we sometimes lose sight of this as the church in the midst of the other outreach work that we do.

"In Charles Dickens's England, some two hundred years ago, at that time, many twelve year old boys were working below in the coal mines, down in the cold mine shafts. Their life was miserable but that is what was expected of the little boys in England at that time: a life of work in the coal mines beginning at age twelve. The church would offer presents at Christmas time to the little boys working away in the coal mines. The church would offer charity and turkeys for the poor coal working families at holiday time. The church would offer prayers for the little boys working away in the coal mines.

"And then, finally, the law was changed so that little boys could no longer work in the coal mines. The law insisted that they go to school instead of go to the coal mines to work.

"Charity is giving Christmas presents at Christmas for the disadvantaged boys in the coal mines and charity is giving turkeys away at sacred holidays and charity is giving prayers for the little hungry boys. Justice is working to change the laws so that it was illegal for little boys to work in the coal mines." (Rev. Marquart, Sermons from Seattle)

To seek justice is immeasurably harder.

Part Two: To love kindness, or love mercy. This second part can feel watered down like "oh, just be nice to all people." But mercy is much more sharp edged than that. Mercy means giving up what is fair and what is owed to us and instead allowing in forgiveness, openness, and grace.

Recently, I listened to interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah, ethicist and author, who was talking about how we view and interact with folks especially in the face of things they might say or do that are hurtful to us on personal lines, or racial lines, or within our family. He was referring to a letter he received from a Filipina woman seeking guidance on how to deal with her (white) in laws who remarked that they couldn't tell one Asian person from another since they all look alike. The woman felt this was a racist slap in the face.

Appiah's advice was that often attitudes most likely reflect ignorance rather than malice and advises cutting these folks some slack. Yes, speaking up, but out of a place of compassion and mercy.

The reason for cutting people slack, he says, "is that it's hard to get things right. Knowledge is a difficult achievement for us; so is leading a good life.

"Yes, people will screw up that's a feature of our nature and our situation. The helpful thing to do when people screw up is to try and help them pick themselves up and dust themselves off and help them start in a different direction. Not to stigmatize them and push them down."

He continued, "I think also its important to understand them. Here's one reason why. If you understand what it is about a person and her circumstances that makes her do something, you might be able to change her circumstances that makes her not want to do that anymore." We can't do that from a place of righteous anger no matter how deserved. Love mercy.

And, finally, to walk humbly with your God. Here in Lexington and the Metro Boston area, one's education level is highly valued, perhaps even more than one's income. And believe me I am both the recipient of and a believer in good education.

But that is not what Micah points to. To walk humbly with God means letting go of what I think I know, what I think I have a corner on, and listening to God. As theologian John Holbert writes, "We could read, then, "walk attentively with your God." Be always aware of God's call for justice, for hesed. We are to be not so much humble as alert, not so much humble as attentive to God's essential call to us. That is what God wants from us."

To pay attention. To be on the lookout for God. And for injustice. And for how we are called to step in. To listen, really listen, for God. Which requires setting aside our own notions of the world and our place in it.

In the 1980s, the University of California at Santa Cruz was just starting to get involved in competitive sports. UCSC had a bit of disdain for the overemphasis some big-time schools place on athletics, so the student body sought a team name that would reflect a somewhat different approach. They decided on the Banana Slug, a yellow, slimy, slow, shell-less mollusk. It was a clever way for UCSC to give a balanced perspective on the relative worth of sports. (sermonillustrations.com)

So, to be humble is to walk like a banana slug with God. Now that is an image to remember!

Finally, as your Interim pastor, I need to pull this back around to the Interim process we are moving through. The Search Team is gathering this month to start the process of looking at candidates. And we will continue to get ready as a church to welcome a settled pastor here.

I imagine the pastor who comes to serve here will work with you on what a vision of justice work can look like a Pilgrim. How can your voices make real change here in this community and beyond? He or she will push you to do the harder work of justice seeking.

As we have worked on looking at Pilgrim's past to better understand how we want to be in the future, a settled pastor will continue to challenge you to the work of mercy. To give each other grace, to forgive one another, to allow space here for difference.

Finally, a settled pastor will bring a new voice here to bring the scripture and voice of God to you. To set aside your place in the world to take time to listen to what God says through the words of a new pastoral leader.

To seek justice
To love mercy
To walk humbly with your God.
It is so clear.

Not easy. But clear. Amen