

Justice? Mercy? Humility?
Micah 6:1-8
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 2, 2020
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Among many Christians I know Micah 6:8 – the last verse of our reading – is a favorite verse of scripture. After all, we are people who understand that our faith impacts our living. We are people who understand that our faith shouldn't just be spoken of, shouldn't just be seen as a means to an end, shouldn't just be witnessed to based on where we spend our Sunday mornings, but we believe our faith should change how we live and cause us to interact with other people and all of creation in ways that make the world a better place, a place that more faithfully reflects God's intentions.

So, most of us like to hear those words at the end of today's reading, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"¹

But what happens when we *really* sit with this text? What happens when we put ourselves in a posture where we are willing to ask difficult questions about it? Do we continue to love it? Do we find ourselves challenged by it? Or perhaps both.

Because, let me show my cards here. My intention is not to have anyone walk out of here saying, "I used to love Micah 6:8, but I never want to hear it again." It is not my desire for any of us to have less affection for it than we did before. But, I *do* want us to look at it honestly and to realize that sometimes, when we rest too comfortably with a certain perspective, that means we aren't listening deeply enough to be challenged by it. So, I want you to love Micah 6:8 – I love Micah 6:8. And I also want us all to be challenged by it.

¹ Micah 6:8, NRSV.

So, first let's remember where this comes from. This beloved verse comes to us from one of the Hebrew prophets. The prophet Micah is understood to be an 8th century – and that would be 8th century *before* the Common Era – an 8th century prophet, a younger contemporary of Isaiah. Micah isn't a big city boy; he doesn't come from a family with political power. Rather he is a small-town boy, a country prophet. Micah is likely speaking around the time of the fall of the northern kingdom. So, at this point in history the nation of Israel has been divided into two nations for a couple hundred years. The northern kingdom has fallen to the great power of Assyria and the southern kingdom is vacillating between fear that they will be next, and confidence that they'll be let off the hook because they are better than their northern cousins. So, it is into this context that these words come.

And, while we love Micah 6:8 – let's remember that this verse doesn't stand on its own. That's why John, Thea and Julie read not one, but eight verses for us today. And we did it in three voices because this passage contains three voices. What we read is set up as a court case. The voice at the beginning is the narrator, the voice of the prophet. We hear that voice say, "Listen! God has an issue and you need to hear it!"

And then, the second voice – that which we hear in verses 3-5 is the voice of Yahweh, of God, of the one bringing the charge against the people. That voice, God, has every right to simply be angry but expresses "heartfelt bewilderment"² saying, "Don't you remember everything we've been through and the ways I have shown up for you? Look back over the course of your history – everywhere you have been I have been with you, redeeming you."

Then the third voice, the voice of the people, responds asking, "What do we have to do? What is enough?" And we hear that list of offerings, with increasing value. If we were to put it

² Carol J. Dempsey, "Theological Perspective on Micah 6:1-8" in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 290.

in language and images familiar to us today, it might say, “Would you be pleased if we came to church every Sunday? Would attending both church and Sunday school be enough? And what if we gave our offerings, not just what is leftover, but what if we tithed, if we really gave 10 percent, if we even gave 10 percent before taxes? Would that be enough?”

Finally, we hear the prophet speak again – that beloved verse – that verse which reminds us that while there are reasons we gather for worship and reasons we give of our time and our money and make offerings to God, what God *really* wants is something much more. If you think it’s hard to show up for church every Sunday and to give offerings when you would rather buy a boat or take another vacation, well, then, friends – you will think it’s extremely hard to do what is actually asked.

Because, what does the Lord require of us? Justice...kindness, also often translated mercy...humility. While they sound good and make for a nice bumper sticker or t-shirt, living this commitment is not easy.

Because justice is about how we regard others – those like us and those very different from us, especially those who are othered by the values of our culture. And it isn’t only about we regard them, but it is about how we share resources with them. And before we get too comfortable thinking that if we are people who care about the poor and volunteer with helping organizations and who are able to have meaningful conversations about racism and sexism and other isms that pervade our lives, let us remember that justice isn’t only about what we value or do as individuals, but it is about reshaping systems for equity, it is about giving up power – because, friends, look around the room...we have power – and justice means not having to have it wrestled from us but being willing to share it.

And kindness or mercy – that isn't about a feeling, just as love isn't about romance or enjoying the company of another. Kindness is about a decision to live ethically in relationship with others according to the covenant of our faith.³ And to *love* kindness means we choose it even when it is difficult.

Do justice...love kindness...and walk humbly with your God. Because, as Carol J. Dempsey wrote, “Only when one walks humbly with God will one come to learn and understand how to do justice and love kindness.”⁴ And while we like to claim humility, the reality is that it is difficult. We are a people who are raised to know the answers, who are applauded for taking charge, for sticking to our convictions. And yet humility means that we are open to seeing another way and to changing our minds. Humility means that we are willing, not to be willy-nilly in our commitments, to be thoughtful in our discernment and to listen more than we talk so that God's voice can be heard over the many voices around us.

Many of you are aware that this past week was Minister's Institute here in the Upper Midwest. 125 pastors and chaplains from around our region gathered at the Christian Conference Center, five from this congregation. And together with the leadership team of this event we dove into the topic of dismantling white supremacy. So, trust me when I say, Micah 6:8 showed up in the room and challenged us to do better and be better and to create a world of justice, mercy and humility. *And it was not easy.* And the work is *nowhere* near done. In fact, each time I enter into one of these conversations I am reminded that we have barely even begun.

We have barely even begun because when most of us learned American history we took tests over which explorers went to which lands in which years but we rarely heard what they did to the indigenous people when they arrived. I am certain that never in my good Iowa education

³ Dempsey, 294.

⁴ Dempsey, 294.

did I hear that when Spanish explorers arrived on this land they led with a declaration – spoken, mind you, in their language not in that of the native people, that said that the explorers came with the right to take over the land and that the indigenous people were encouraged to become Christian and to offer their loyalty to the Spanish King and Queen. And this declaration ended saying, “if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault.”⁵

And friends, while we can point out that this was 500 years ago, we are not being just if we refuse to understand the ways this reality continues to impact not only our relationship with indigenous people but with all people of color.

The examples could go on and on. Racism, our country’s original sin, is a great place to root the conversation but certainly not the only place we need to have it.

These conversations are difficult. We often resist them. But if we are to embrace the call of Micah 6:8, and really the call of our faith as a whole, we must be willing to learn how to engage them and to engage each other.

Just a few weeks ago, my friend Leon Riley died. Leon was a young pastor at the time of the now famous civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. He drove a latrine truck during

⁵ Juan Lopez de Palacios Rubios. “*Requirimiento*, 1513.”

the march because he was there to do whatever was needed. At one point he was one of six men asked, at the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, when his life had been threatened, to escort King out. Later, Leon picked up a 19-year-old African American man alongside the road after the person that young man had been riding with was shot in the head.⁶ And Leon's commitment to justice went well beyond that week in Alabama. He would remind us in so many ways, simply in the way he lived, that the work was not done and that the work was important.

Friends, we love Micah 6:8. But it won't let us sit back and relax. It asks us to be active in our world and to do the hard and risky work of truly living our faith. It can be overwhelming *and* it is important.

So, perhaps we need these words from the Jewish Talmud, an important reflection on this text. It reads, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to abandon it."⁷

Amen.

⁶ https://fox59.com/2018/01/13/former-local-minister-escorted-mlk-out-of-selma-march-speech-after-death-threat/?fbclid=IwAR1Ov__Jt-QLitDLM3KZht6AEo6k2jEXj4sasx_6jrnUbgK_vJ1pRxueqDs

⁷ Rabbi Rami Shapiro based on: Rabbi Tarfon, Michah 6:8, Pirkei Avot found at <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/mourning-ritual.pdf>