

Our Calling, Our Challenge
Micah 6:1-8
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
January 29, 2023
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A few years ago, I believe it was during my first year serving this congregation, I had a conversation with Bob Welsh on a Sunday after worship. Bob, as most of you know, is a previous pastor of our church having served here from 1965 to 1992. Well, after worship one day Bob came up to me and said something like, "You know, all of us who are preachers have one sentence that could summarize most of our sermons; one sentence that comes up all the time."

Our conversation went on with him sharing with me what *his* sentence had been and then telling me what he had figured out about me and what that one central idea that keeps showing up in my preaching is.

Now, I'm not going to tell you what it is that Bob figured out (although I suspect many of you have come to a similar conclusion). But I am not going to share that because, after all, this sermon isn't really about that. (Well, it will likely be about that one sentence, but it isn't about me or my conversation with Bob.)

Rather I bring that up because the reality is that there are some central ideas, some central convictions, and sometimes some central pieces of scripture that shape so much of what we do and who we are both individually and congregationally.

Today's scripture is one of those. Especially that last verse: *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?*

That verse, and a few others like it, come up often around here. This is not the first time we have heard Micah 6 in worship, not even in the last year. Most recently before today it was the focus text for the sermon in November when Kalea Seaton preached. And I have preached it here before as well.

But it is not only in the sermons...we also hear this come up in other ways during worship. If we are paying attention we will notice themes from that scripture show up often in the songs we sing and in the prayers we pray. They simply show up often in the conversations we have.

If we had to pick a single verse of scripture that speaks to who we are or who we feel called to be as a community, I am certain Micah 6:8 would be at the top of our list of choices.

And that is good. Because among a handful of other scriptures, this is one that weaves its way fully through the Judeo-Christian story. This is one that has, as its essence, the central values of the prophets, of Jesus, of the heart of God.

But there is also a little bit of danger when we become overly familiar with a piece of scripture, when we become overly comfortable claiming it as our own.

I feel this way often when something like scripture becomes popular. In fact, the other day I did an internet search for Micah 6:8 t-shirts. You can do it right now if you want to pull your phone out. Not only was there no shortage of t-shirts and sweatshirts that popped up, but there were stickers and pop sockets and decorative wall hangings as well.

“Great!” you might say. This message needs to be out there. And, yes, it does.

But, what if we are so comfortable with these words that we wear them and carry them and look at them, but have forgotten to actually do them?

What if these words have become our motto in such a way that we can repeat them, but that we’ve quit really thinking about them, asking about them, letting them ask us difficult questions and challenge us to live differently?

See, the danger with anything that is woven deeply into our lives is that we take it for granted, we quit engaging it, we tame it.

This piece of scripture - *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?* - this piece of scripture should challenge us as much or more than it comforts us. If we are willing to wear it on a t-shirt or hang it on our wall, then we might want to pause and ask about the risky work to which it calls us.

So, what does it mean to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God?

Justice. Oh my, how we often get this one wrong. Our favorite way as a culture to use this word is connected with law and punishment, with criminals and crimes. And yet, the word we hear as justice, in the Hebrew, is far different than that. Justice is social in nature - it is about the connections and systems within which we live in community. And justice is about rectifying the inequalities in society. ([Ae4 Year A, Epiphany 4, Commentary, Mic 6:1-8, OT \(crivoice.org\)](#))

Kalea talked a little about this in November as she helped us to parse out the difference between service and justice, because sometimes we get them confused. Sometimes we think the important-yet-incomplete-work of serving meals or setting up shelters or clothing people is the full work of justice. But Kalea reminded us that we often stop at tending to the wounds, to the obvious needs, rather than digging deeper. Let me quote her here as she said, “if we never address the root causes or the systemic issues that

cause hurt in our community, we can keep trying to patch the wounds, but there will always be the larger problem, and people will continue to be hurt and trapped by the systems our society has created. Justice, really, is about attacking the root problem.” (Kalea Seaton, from sermon given at First Christian Church in Coralville, November 13, 2022).

And if that isn’t enough, then the prophet goes on inviting us to love kindness. But again, we often soften the impact of this statement. We make it about being nice. And come on, Iowa, we are nothing if not nice!

But loving kindness, sometimes translated perhaps more appropriately as mercy, this Hebrew word “hesed” is so much bigger than a passing kindness. This is not warm and fuzzy at all, but is, as Dennis Bratcher wrote, about “a commitment and steadfast dependability that arises from mutual relationship. To love *hesed* was to be committed not only to God who had...demonstrated [God’s] own *hesed* to the people. It was also to live in community in such a way that *hesed* marked life together as God’s people. To love *hesed* was to be committed to a quality of life that was governed by the principles of mutual respect, helpfulness, and loving concern” (www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearA/Aepiphany4ot.html).

So, this is more than an act, although sometimes we do act ourselves into feeling. But at its heart this is about a deep concern and commitment to the other.

And I suspect it is no accident that this list concludes with walking humbly with God. What better way to become people of justice and mercy than “to allow our heart to be broken by the things that break the heart of God...to see the world through the eyes of God, to act in the world as God would act” (www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearA/Aepiphany4ot.html).

What would happen if we were in such deep communion with God that we couldn’t help but do just this?

What if, as Eric Rucker reminded us last week, the personal transformation of our faith is not just to make us feel better or secure our ticket to heaven, but is ultimately about our call to transform the world?

Friends, we are not unlike the people in Micah’s time. Sometimes things get in the way of commitment to God and neighbor. Sometimes those things are the rituals or practices that we cling to in order to tell ourselves we are doing enough. Sometimes those things are just other things...busyness and distractions and priorities that have nothing to do with God.

But we are invited...and not only invited, but challenged...to live more deeply with God that we may live and love more fully in this world.

We are invited to take the risks and to be brave in ways that we haven't been before, in order to create a world in sync with the heart of God, a world where the playing field is leveled and all are valued.

So, what does this look like for you? How will your life look different if you live in deep relationship with God? How will your commitment to the care of others and the righting of the wrongs within our systems change if you take this challenge seriously?

Friends, God has told us what is good. What does God require of us? To do justice. To love mercy. To walk humbly in relationship with our God who walks with all people.

May this be our calling and our commitment. Amen.