

An Active Faith
Micah 6:8, James 2:14-17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Kalea Seaton

How do you define faith? It's a big question that many of us may ask ourselves, and there may be no real answer. In fact, there are many different answers to this question. Some say it's the belief in a higher power or divine being. Others say faith is about congregating others together for the cause of an organization such as the Church. Maybe faith is in order to save ourselves for a perceived afterlife. All of these could be correct, but I want to bring attention to a different kind of faith, a faith in God that motivates us to care about the people and world around us.

This summer, I spent a week and a half with about 20 other high school juniors and seniors from across Iowa. We gathered together in the small Iowa town of Indianola, home of Simpson College, and embarked on a program called Simpson Youth Academy, also referred to as its acronym, SYA. On their website, the program is described as a place to "explore deep faith-related questions and take action, in order to equip youth to live into their callings as agents of peace and justice in the church and world." And while this is the main theme of the program, I found it to be much more than this, and I learned so much from when I was there, that I was invited to share some of what I learned with you.

Many of the educational snippets were set up similarly to college lectures, one of which we called faith and justice, a class we took each day together. We also had educational field trips, one of which we visited a farm committed to sustainable agriculture, where we focused on the effects of climate change and ways in which ordinary people are working to break the cycle of destruction caused by harmful practices such as factory farming.

The other trip we took was to downtown Des Moines, where we focused on the impacts of gentrification, a process by which a traditional, more poor urban area is taken over by wealthier developers, making the area unaffordable to people living there previously. We looked at how this played out in real communities and what a city and its people look like after this process, especially focusing on the less visible ramifications.

We also visited a shelter for those without homes and helped to serve the people there in different ways, including serving lunch to the residents of the shelter and others in the community, as well as helping out in the shelter's garden.

Alongside these experiences, we had two movie nights, one in which focused on the impacts of technology and mental health, and the other focusing on climate change.

All of these experiences and subsequent conversation/discussion were filled with so much information, most of which was really quite frightening and seemingly hopeless. And so the time spent with our instructor in the faith and justice lectures was

a time where we broke down the things we were learning about, and connected it more to how our faith calls us to not give up or be discouraged, but to take action against the things we see are hurting people in our communities.

When I was preparing for this message today, Pastor Jill asked me which scriptures I wanted to have in the service. After some discussion and discernment, the two scriptures I chose for this service are Micah 6:8 as well as James 2:14-17.

The first of these is likely familiar if not well-known to many. Used in Bible studies, activities of memorizing scripture, and more, Micah 6:8 is one of those verses in the bible looked upon fondly by many. However, digging deeper into this scripture and the real meaning that can be drawn from it, I believe it has more to say than we may have thought through in the past. Micah mentions three things we should do, which is to do justice, love kindness, and alongside both of these, walk humbly with our God.

Firstly, doing justice. What is justice, and what does it mean to act justly in today's terms? Let's look at it this way, if someone had a broken leg, band-aids could help with some of the small scratches and medication could relieve some pain, but in order for the leg to heal properly, you would have to investigate the injury and then fix the bone itself (perhaps with a cast or even surgery). Although not inherently obvious from the outside, the leg would never be able to function properly if only the surface was treated, and the deeper problems aren't fixed. Additionally, if the injury was caused, not by the person's own clumsiness, but by a broken sidewalk or a bigoted attack, we would want to address that cause as well.

This metaphor can be applied to real social justice issues; 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.

Secondly in this verse, we are told to love kindness. One type of kindness that can be tied in with the theme of justice is service. In the metaphor earlier, service could be described as the band-aids. Although they can't fix the broken leg on their own, they can help with the casualties of the bigger problem. The organization of the Church generally likes to focus mostly on this service, doing things like serving lunch at a shelter, winter clothing drives, donating food, money, etc. And while all of these are necessary to provide some immediate relief, they don't really change anything if they are not also accompanied by actions of justice. It is important to take care of the people who need it, but it is equally important to fight against systems that put them there in the first place.

Lastly, we are instructed to walk humbly alongside God. This piece digs deeper into the motivation and reasoning we are called to have behind justice and service. We aren't meant to act upon service and justice for the purpose of boasting or for ourselves.

Micah tells us to do these actions with humility as well as faith, which is where the scripture of James comes into play.

The James passage can act as what can be seen as a criticism to a more traditional, internalized faith. Nothing about a personal faith is bad, in fact it is really quite good to have. But what James is trying to say is that isn't the only type of faith you should have. While faith might begin with a personal relationship with God, it should motivate something more. Faith should be used also to carry out God's work into the world, in the form of justice and service. James also adds how not only should we do good works, but as people of faith those works should be rooted out of our faith.

Faith is the "for what", the purpose, the reason behind the works. Faith drives our desire to help others in need, knowing that we aren't there for ourselves or for a pat on the back, but rather knowing that these people who are in need are our neighbors, and just like us, they are children of God. Because our faith is meant to be humble and not boastful. Our job as people of faith is to be messengers of God's work, which often looks like being people of service and justice within our communities, as well as vocalizing this on a larger scope, speaking up for issues our faith calls us to.

So, what does justice mean and actually look like in our everyday lives? Justice often is seen as a big daunting word, almost unreachable for the everyday person. But there are ways in which we can carry out the goal of justice ourselves. The first, which is built into the systems of power in our country, is voting. We are fortunate to have a government in which we have a say in who goes into office and in which we have influence over policies and laws. It is important that we use our voice through our ballots, to put people of justice into positions of power in which they can work to chip away at systemic issues impacting our communities, on our behalf.

And on those occasions when elections don't feel like they have gone in the direction of justice, it is important not to be discouraged, but to be persistent in our drive for action, and to keep voting.

It is also important to be organizing on behalf of both justice and service. Whether you are a leader who is comfortable speaking out loudly or organizing an event, or whether you are a follower who is willing to do the hard work as someone else instructs, both are equally as important. And we are a congregation full of people who work hard for the benefit of our community. The challenge is for all of us to continue to remain aware of the needs in our community and world...to discover places where we can carry out God's work in this world and partner with others who are doing this work.

After worship today we are hosting an alternative gift market, where the opportunity is given to donate to helping organizations as a gift for our loved ones, rather than buying tangible holiday gifts - that most of us can do without. Using our money in ways that reflect our core values and passions as people of faith is another way to contribute to justice and service in our communities. And so, I would invite all of you to check out the market after worship today, but also be mindful going out into the

world, of the different opportunities and ways you see to do God's work, and to take care of each other and our neighbors through service to them, as well as justice within our world.

All my life I've been told ways in which faith should look like, and I discovered this in new ways this summer at Simpson Youth Academy. This is what was modeled by Jesus. As people of faith we are asked to care for people and for the world in ways that heal the brokenness and offer the fullness of life to all.

May it be so.