

What In the World Are We Doing Here?

Micah 6:1-8 & Matthew 5:1-12

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Micah 6:1-8 (NIV)

¹ Listen to what the LORD says: “Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. ² Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel.

³ “My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. ⁴ I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. ⁵ My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember [your journey] from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, ² and He began to teach them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

What In the World Are We Doing Here?

The story is told about a concert held in Philadelphia, PA. One of the pieces played by the orchestra featured a flute solo. This solo was to be played offstage so that it would sound as if coming from a great distance. The conductor had instructed the flutist to count the measures precisely in order to come in at the exact time. After all, with the flutist offstage, there could be no visual contact between the two of them.

On the night of the performance, when the time came for the flute solo, the flutist counted perfectly and came in precisely at the right time. The light, lilting notes floated out beautifully across the theater. Suddenly, however, there was a terrible shrieking noise and then the soloist went silent. The conductor was outraged. At the end of the piece he rushed off stage to find the poor flutist. However, the flutist was ready for him.

“Maestro,” he said, “Before you say anything let me tell you exactly what happened. You’re not going to believe it. As you are aware I came in precisely on time and everything was going beautifully. Then suddenly — this enormous stage hand ran up and grabbed away my flute. Then he pushed me back and snapped at me. “Shut up, you idiot!” he said, “Don’t you know there’s a concert going on out there?”

The poor flutist. He was only doing what he had been told to do by playing off-stage.

I don’t know about you, but there have been times in my life when I thought I was doing all the right things, and then suddenly life has taken a sharp turn and I have been as startled as that flutist. At such times I have been tempted to ask, “What in the world am I doing here? What does it all mean? What is expected out of me?”

Sometimes it even bleeds over into my religious life. “Things aren’t going the way I expected,” I think to myself. “How far do I take this religion business? How much does God really expect out of me?”

Well, of course, there is an answer to that question in Scripture. I suppose there are few verses in the Old Testament, or the New, that are better known than Micah 6:8, particularly in the Revised Standard Version translation: “He has showed you, O man, 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?”

I suspect this text is well known for two reasons. One, it has three easily discerned sections which make it easy to deal with — do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. What a nice outline for a sermon. But secondly, it deals in a simple way with that age-old question, “What does God expect?” One of the reasons I like this text is that it is as relevant to our world today as it was to the world in which Micah lived.

Micah is considered one of the Minor Prophets. We don’t know a whole lot about him except that he was a prophet in the 8th century, a contemporary of three better known prophets — Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Micah was a prophet who spoke for the downtrodden and exploited people of Judean society, particularly for the poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of powerful landlords.

Imagine him as an 8th century version of Bernie Sanders calling for income equality. This may help you as you seek to understand the three Biblical demands he places upon our lives: “He has showed you, O man, 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?”

LET'S BEGIN WITH THE CALL TO LOVE KINDNESS.

Here is the most basic, the most minimal requirement of all religion — that we should treat other people as we would like to be treated. A great Quaker gentleman expressed it well over two centuries ago when he wrote: “I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again.”

All good religion begins here. We may not be able to agree on everything. Indeed, we may have some areas of our lives in which we are in sharp conflict with one another, but we can at least treat each other with civility, and with simple human kindness.

There was an item in the Reader's Digest not too long ago about a man named Patrick Connelly. Connelly is a fan of country music star and TV celebrity Blake Shelton. In fact, Connelly was fortunate enough to attend a Blake Shelton concert in Overland Park, Kansas.

Unfortunately, Connelly is in a wheelchair. All he could see at the concert was a sea of people. Then the most amazing thing happened. Without being asked, two strangers hoisted Connelly aloft on their shoulders, and they held him there for over 20 minutes in grueling 100-degree heat — long enough for the disabled man to watch his hero perform. That's kindness. To be kind is the least we can do in this unkind world.

Of course, the Bible places no limits on our kindness. We are even to be kind to those who are unkind to us. Exodus 23:9 requires the children of Israel not to oppress aliens within the land — with the reminder that they were once aliens within Egypt themselves. Today for us that would be any group of immigrants who were not born here. But, Jesus, of course, went even farther than that when He said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... (Mt. 5: 44).”

There are to be no limits placed upon our kindness. We are to pour out acts of love and generosity even toward persons that we may deem undeserving. For Christians this is particularly significant because we believe that God poured out His love on us when we were undeserving.

Kindness is among the most basic requirements for the believer. Sometimes our acts of kindness meet with only cold ingratitude from the recipients of those acts. That's all right. That's on them. We obey Jesus. Kindness is the first business of a follower of Jesus.

Someone once asked, if you were given a dollar for every kind word or deed which you said or did, and then had to give back fifty cents for every unkind word or deed, would you be rich or poor? Think about it. We are to love kindness.

WE ARE ALSO TO DO JUSTICE.

Justice is a much larger and more complicated concept than kindness. Kindness is an individual act. I see a person in need and, like the Good Samaritan, I try to help. That is kindness. Justice, on the other hand, is the passion that followers of Jesus have for making certain that every person on earth has a decent opportunity for a healthy, wholesome, rewarding life.

Abraham Lincoln once saw a girl being sold as a slave on an auction block like a head of cattle. She was being sold away from her family and friends. Lincoln saw the fright and terror in her eyes. “This thing must go,” Lincoln said. He was referring to the institution of slavery. And he dedicated his life to the destruction of that barbaric institution. That is doing justice!

No concept is more Christian or more American than is the demand for justice. Wherever there are people who are oppressed — whether it be political oppression, economic oppression, racial oppression, or whatever form that oppression may take, we must raise our voices.

A Lutheran pastor, Ed Markquart, gives one of the best examples of the difference between kindness and justice that I know of. He reminds us of a story from Charles Dicken’s England some two hundred years ago. At that time, many twelve year old boys were working in coal mines, down in the dangerous mine shafts. Their life was miserable, but that was what was expected of twelve year old boys in poor families in England at that time: a lifetime of hard work in the coal mines beginning when they were only children.

The Church tried to be kind to these poor boys. They would offer presents at Christmas time. Their families would receive charity and holiday turkeys. The Church would offer prayers for the little boys working away in those coal mines.

However, one day some determined leaders in that island nation, after much urging and work done by church people, passed a much-needed law. The law said that little boys could no longer work in coal mines. The law also insisted that these boys go to school instead of going to the coal mines to work.

There, my friends, is the difference between acts of kindness and doing justice. Kindness is giving Christmas presents to disadvantaged boys in coal mines; kindness is giving their families turkeys during the holiday season, and kindness is praying for them. Doing justice is working to change the laws so that it is illegal for little boys to work in the coal mines in the first place.

Many of the child labor laws came into existence because Christian people, both pastors and laypeople, felt it was their Christian duty as followers of Jesus Christ to get involved to seek justice for those who could not help themselves. We as God’s people, the Church, must always make sure that we are not content to offer only kindness. Kindness is great. It is the first step in following Jesus, but it is only the beginning of that journey. It is the bare minimum. We are to love kindness, but we are also to do justice. We need both. We need to be kind, but we also need to be champions of justice.

Whether it be in Syria or the Sudan or here at home, wherever there are people who are being treated cruelly, we have a mission. Doing justice is much more complicated than loving kindness — but it is equally a part of our Christian witness.

As you know working for justice is not always a popular theme in our world. Some would say, “Charity begins at home.” For people, however, who recognize that their lives have been bought with the blood of Christ on the cross, such an attitude is repulsive. We are here today because God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. We are here today because a Man from Galilee cared more about us than He did about Himself. If our response to that is only to shut ourselves off in our own little designer cocoon with our luxury automobiles, expensive high-tech toys, and big screen TVs while the rest of the world goes to hell, we are in deep spiritual trouble.

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU BUT TO DO JUSTICE, AND TO LOVE KINDNESS, AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD?

Few characteristics are as appealing in a person as is genuine humility. However, here Micah is talking about a special kind of humility. It is like unto the meekness Jesus praised when He said in Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Jesus was not talking about the shy, timid mouse of a person who is content to serve as the world’s doormat. Rather He was talking about people who are so committed to serving God, and serving other people, that they have an astounding impact on our world.

John Killinger once told of an article that appeared years ago in the Atlantic Monthly. It was about a little burro that was employed in the heyday of the great western cattle ranches to help tame strong and rambunctious steers.

It worked like this. The steer, bucking and convulsing like a raging sailor, was haltered to the little burro, and the two were turned loose together onto the desert range. Like a scene from an old Laurel and Hardy comedy, the giant steer and the little burro would be seen disappearing over the horizon, the great steer tossing the poor burro about like a streamer in the wind. They would sometimes be gone for days. But eventually they would return, the little burro in the lead, trotting along for home with the submissive steer in tow. Somewhere, out on the rim of the world, the steer would become exhausted from his strenuous attempts to rid himself of the burro; and at that point the burro would take mastery and become the leader.

The little burro might appear to be meek or humble, but through its determination and persistence it conquered the mighty steer.

The meekness, or humility, that Jesus and Micah were talking about is the person who has so surrendered his or her life completely to God that he or she develops a fierce determination and persistence in seeing God’s kingdom be realized. That kind of humility or meekness leads to tremendous power and effectiveness in life.

Pastor Tony Bland once described such a humble person. Bland begins by telling about a statue, the largest cast iron statue in the world that sits atop Red Mountain overlooking the city of Birmingham, Alabama. What you may not know about Birmingham is that, like Pittsburgh, PA, it once was a major center for the production of iron and steel. The 56-foot tall statue that sits on Red Mountain depicts the Roman god Vulcan, god of the fire and forge. It is a symbol of Birmingham's past, reflecting its roots in the iron and steel industry.

But there is another statue in Birmingham. Down from atop Red Mountain, in the heart of this industrial city, is a park in front of a church. In that park is a statue that portrays a little man on his knees with his hands raised to heaven. This man was known simply as Brother Bryan. Bryan had been the pastor of a small Presbyterian Church.

Brother Bryan was a humble pastor who was often seen kneeling hand in hand on a street corner praying with someone. He pastored in Birmingham for more than a quarter of a century. He was a servant to all. He was a meek and humble man. But when he died, businesses closed, flags were hung at half mast, and the whole city wept in sorrow at his departure. They built a statue to serve as a memorial to this humble pastor.

Tony Bland writes, "When the statue of Vulcan has tumbled to dust, and Red Mountain is worn flat, the witness and work of Pastor Bryan will remain." Brother Bryan was a humble man, but he moved an entire city through his devotion to serving God and others. That is the kind of humility or meekness that God seeks in us.

So, what in the world are you doing here? Whatever else you are involved in, I hope you are engaged in these three simple but courageous activities: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

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