

Sermon – Just, Kind, and Humble  
Sunday, January 29, 2023  
Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12  
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Our first scripture reading, Micah 6:1-8, transcends the immediate context of Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE to bring a message relevant for all times. In this ancient poem, a courtroom is depicted with Yahweh God presenting a case against Israel, and Creation serving as the jury. Following the persuasive testimony of Yahweh, Israel offers no self-defense but asks a series of questions regarding what the Lord requires. When the question is responded to in this decisive passage the answer is simple, straightforward, and without the pretense of the material world. Micah rejects the ancient Hebrew sacrificial system as a means of establishing a complete relationship with God. Rather, wholeness calls for a response that involves a change in attitudes and actions on the part of individual men and women. Hear now God's word.

*1 Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with God's people, and God will contend with Israel. 3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." 6 "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God 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 give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8 God 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? Amen.*

With these words from the prophet Micah on our hearts and minds, we turn to our second scripture reading in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1-12. Jesus' ministry begins with the Sermon on the Mount, the most comprehensive collection of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament. In these teachings, we discover continuity between what is required of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven and what is required of the covenant children of Israel. Jesus begins his teachings with the beatitudes, which reverse the world's value system and pronounce blessings on the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. To interpret "blessed" as "happy" misses the depth of meaning in this word. The blessed, for Jesus, are those who experience a sense of peace, an inner strength and well-being...it is well with their soul. The blessed are those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. Listen now for God's word.

*1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then Jesus began to speak, and taught 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 receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Just, Kind, and Humble

*Text: God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, as we reflect together on what you require, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Accountability is a good thing and today we at Westminster Presbyterian Church hold one another accountable in the presentation of the 2022 Annual Report. Our hope and prayer is that amid the important and sometimes tedious details within this report, we get a glimpse of a faith community that is just, kind, and humble. The purpose and the discipline of preparing this document is not to justify ourselves and our own righteousness but rather to be accountable for what the Lord requires, recognizing our small part in the greater good of the kingdom of heaven.

It is not uncommon for people of faith to get caught up in religious practices or specific doctrines and lose sight of what the Lord requires. For Micah's contemporaries it was the familiar and well-defined practice of sacrificial offerings which got in the way. This religious ritual has not been practiced by Judaism since the first century following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. However, during Micah's time it was considered disrespectful to come before God in the Temple empty handed. Burnt sacrifices such as thanksgiving or sin offerings were presented regularly. The question about offering one's first born reflects a practice of Israel's neighboring cultures. Human sacrifice was never permitted in the Israelite religion and the prophets spoke sharply against it.

Micah seeks to clarify what God requires. Rather than being consumed with religious practices and beliefs that justify oneself, people of faith are expected to be *just, kind, and humble*.

Peter made an interesting observation about the sermon title this week. If one were to remove the comma following just, the title would read "just kind and humble." Certainly, Micah would be quick to say that to be "just kind and humble" is not what God requires. Seeking justice is the first prerequisite within the trinity of requirements for people of faith. So much of our Christian faith is rooted in justice...seeking justice for the poor, the young, the marginalized, the oppressed. This is at the heart of biblical teachings.

Last Sunday, Peter and I taught the eighth-grade confirmation class on being disciples of Christ and asked these bright, young people to name something they were willing to follow, to advocate for, and to make sacrifices to obtain. We gave them a few minutes to think about it and then went around the table. Each confirmand spoke spontaneously and articulately about causes which were important to them: James Maeda spoke of eliminating Systemic Racism, Sam Batterman addressed climate change, Maria DeJong spoke of women's rights, Macklin Metzger and Abigail Eldridge's causes were reproductive justice and animal rights.

Westminster's youth care about justice, which according to theologian Walter Brueggemann, *is to actively engage in the redistribution of power and to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others*. Yes, Westminster's youth care about justice and today, the prophet Micah declares that the first requirement for people of faith is to live just lives...just, kind, and humble lives.

Like Micah, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount also clarify what God requires. Jesus' contemporaries focused on keeping the letter of the law without concern for others. Throughout Jesus' ministry he confronts religious leaders who are arrogant and more concerned with justifying themselves than being kind to those in need.

At one point Matthew (23:23) quotes Jesus, saying, *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.*

In the beatitudes Jesus offers what is just and kind: *hope, inner strength, and well-being to those who mourn and those whose spirits are weary, respect to the peacemakers who absorb hostilities they don't deserve, gentleness to the meek, humanity to the merciful, and compassion to the persecuted.*

According to Jesus, who called fishermen to be disciples along the Sea of Galilee and who calls young confirmands to be disciples in Springfield: those who follow Christ are expected to live a just, kind, and humble life.

We have talked about what it means to be just and kind. What does a humble life look like? To be humble implies an attitude of reverence and openness, coupled with a sense of personal integrity, candor, and honesty. A humble life acknowledges one's need for forgiveness, negating the necessity to justify oneself. Although being humble is the final prerequisite within the trinity of requirements for people of faith, being humble comes first because without it, one is incapable of being just and kind.

Today well-intended people still get caught up in a particular religious practice or doctrine. More concerned with justifying ourselves than seeking justice for others, we lose sight of the bigger picture of what God calls us to do. Micah and Jesus remind us of this danger within governments and faith communities who claim to be just and yet show no mercy, who claim to be righteous and yet deny the truth. God desires more than empty words and rituals!

This month as we remember the civil rights movement and honor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., many of us have learned the truth about the history of Black Protest in America from Rev. Hawkins and the cruel details in the 1908 Springfield Race Riot from Dr. Berkowitz. With the recent death of a young, black man at the hands of Memphis police officers, the words of Bryan Stevenson, attorney and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative speak volumes.

*We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others.*

May we hold fast as a community of faith and a nation of citizens and together live just, kind, and humble lives. This is what the Lord requires! Amen.