

Sermon – “A Misunderstanding”

Sunday, February 2, 2014

Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

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Our first scripture reading from the prophet Micah (6:1-8) transcends the immediate context of eighth century Jerusalem to bring a message relevant for all times. In this ancient poem, a courtroom is depicted with Yahweh presenting words of heartfelt bewilderment in a case against Israel and creation serving as the jury. Following the persuasive testimony of Yahweh, Israel offers no self-defense. Instead a series of questions are asked revealing that Israel seriously misunderstands “what it is the Lord requires of them.”

When the question is responded to in this decisive passage the answer is remarkably simple and straightforward. 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. Although these attitudes and actions are not easily achieved, anyone who chooses to take them seriously understands what it is Yahweh requires. 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 him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of 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?*

With these words of wisdom from the prophet Micah on our hearts and minds, we turn to our second scripture reading in the gospel of Matthew 5:1-12. For Matthew Jesus’ ministry begins with the Sermon on the Mount. Within this comprehensive collection of Jesus’ teachings there can be no misunderstanding about who Jesus is and what he expects from those who respond to the summons to “follow him” as Peter, Andrew, James and John did. There is continuity between what Jesus understands is required of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven and what Micah understands is required of the Israelites. For Matthew, Jesus came *not to abolish, but to fulfill the law and the prophets*. Jesus begins his teaching with traditional blessings known as beatitudes emphasizing those who are held especially dear in God’s heart. Today is the first of five weeks reflecting together on the Sermon of the Mount. 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 he 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.

The title of the sermon: "A Misunderstanding"

*The text: "...what does the Lord require of you..." Micah 6:8a*

Let us pray: Holy God, we give you thanks for opportunities to deepen our understanding of what it is you require of us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Life is full of misunderstandings and so it's not surprising to discover misunderstandings about what is required of those who choose to walk with God. There is a tendency among people to get caught up in a particular religious practice or doctrine and lose sight of the bigger picture of what God requires of us.

For Micah's contemporaries the religious practice that shaped their misunderstanding was the familiar and well-defined practice of sacrificial offerings. This religious ritual has not been practiced by Judaism since the first century following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE less than 50 years following Jesus' death and resurrection.

We see glimpses of this practice in New Testament writings. Luke speaks of Mary and Joseph offering the sacrifice of two turtledoves at the time they presented Jesus in the temple and Christ is identified in John's gospel as the *lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*, a reference to the sin offering. Which animal was required for the offering depended on the socio economic income of the family. For instance, if Mary and Joseph came from wealth, they would have been expected to present a lamb instead of two turtledoves.

During Micah's time it was considered disrespectful to come before Yahweh empty handed. Sacrifices were presented as thanksgiving offerings and sin offerings. The question about offering one's first born reflects a practice of Israel's neighboring cultures rather than their own. Human sacrifice was never a part of Israelite religion and the prophets spoke sharply against it.

When Micah hears these questions, it became apparent to him that a religious practice, which was intended to be a means to a healthy relationship with God had replaced the relationship and became an end in itself. Micah seeks to clarify the misunderstanding people have about what it is God requires of them. Rather than being consumed with religious practices that justify themselves, the people are called to redirect their energy *doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with their God*.

Not unlike Micah, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount sought to clarify misunderstandings about what God requires. The misunderstanding of Jesus' contemporaries is 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

and their own righteousness than blessing the ones whose lives need healing and comfort. In the beatitudes Jesus offers hope and blessing to *those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.*

At one point Matthew (23:23) quotes Jesus as 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 faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.*

Misunderstandings about what God requires of us continue today. Well-intended people like you and I still get caught up in a particular religious practice or doctrine, we are often more concerned with justifying ourselves than seeking justice for others and we lose sight of the bigger picture of what God calls us to do. Micah and Jesus remind us of the dangers within a community of faith that becomes skilled at talking the talk without walking the walk. God desires more than empty words and rituals!

To walk humbly implies an attitude of reverence and openness, coupled with a sense of personal integrity, candor and honesty. To walk humbly acknowledges one's shortcomings and need for forgiveness. To walk humbly negates the need to justify oneself before God and one another. Only when one learns to "walk the walk" of humility will one understand how to do justice and love kindness.

A Norman Rockwell poster is framed and hangs in Peter's office in our Springfield home. One of the familiar Saturday Evening Post magazine covers dated March 9, 1929, it portrays a white haired man sitting in front of a secretariat listening intently, with a stethoscope, to the heartbeat of a doll held by a little girl with a reluctant look on her face.

This poster was a gift from Peter's father in 1993 when Peter began to practice medicine and it hung in his pediatric office until he transitioned into emergency room medicine in 2005. The quote below the vivid artwork of Norman Rockwell came to my mind as I was reflecting on this sermon. Attributed to Jean Jacques Rousseau, it reads. *What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?*

It seems to me this is what Micah is saying about religion, the life of faith and the walk of humility. If our lives are not kind –if our words are out of control, angry and hurtful, and if our routines are so filled with rituals and justifying ourselves that we have no time to bless others, no time for acts of kindness, what difference does a life of faith make? Or perhaps more to the point, without kindness, is there faith? Or as Mr. Rousseau would ask: *What faith can you find that is greater than kindness?*

Kindness recognizes and honors those among us who mourn and those whose spirits are weary. Kindness respects the peacemakers among us who absorb hostilities they don't deserve, with dignity and grace, and kindness looks for ways to balance the inequities in our world.

We lost a great singer and songwriter this week. Pete Seeger, who spearheaded an American folk revival and spent a lifetime championing folk music as both a vital heritage and a catalyst for social change, died on Monday at the age of 94. He sang for the labor movement in the 1940s and 50s, for civil rights marches and anti-Vietnam War rallies in the 1960s, and for environmental and antiwar causes in the 1970s and beyond. "We Shall Overcome," which Mr. Seeger adapted from old spirituals, became the civil rights anthem. Other songs he composed

are "If I Had a Hammer," "Where Have all the Flowers Gone," and "Turn, Turn, Turn," based on Ecclesiastes 3. Pete Seeger believed in the power of music and changed our world through the gifts he shared.

The song "What does the Lord Require of You?" based on Micah 6 has been a catalyst of change nourishing and sustaining people of faith through the years. I learned it as a younger woman at a Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference and I have sung it through the years in church, with my family around the piano, even in the shower. In fact, I have a distinct memory of singing this song in the kitchen of our Clayton home. Looking out the window I was chanting "to seek justice and love kindness." I didn't realize that our son Paul, who was almost four at the time, was listening so intently until he walked over to the same window. Looking outside he said, "Mom, where is justice?" A misunderstanding? Yes and no! I'd like to leave Paul's question with each of us as we consider what it is the Lord requires.

Where is justice in our lives?

Where is kindness and mercy?

In what ways do we walk humbly with our God?

Do not pray for easy lives, my friends. Amen.