

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, September 3, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Micah 6:1-8; James 2:14-18,26
“What does the Lord require?”

If you have been in worship here in New St James for any time, I am sure you are aware that I usually follow the Revised Common Lectionary. The Lectionary lays out a three-year cycle of texts that covers the major themes in Scripture.

I remind you of that to tell you that for my remaining time in this pulpit, I am not going to follow the Lectionary. Instead I am going to indulge myself and revisit some of my favourite texts. As I started to plan this series, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that it will also allow me to celebrate many aspects in the life and ministries of New St James.

So today, Micah 6:8: *what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

Those words form what is surely one of the greatest directives for ethical living in all of the religious writings of the world – short and direct, plain and simple. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God.

The context in which we read these words in Micah seems to suggest that they are woven into the very fabric of creation, that they lie right at the heart of life in the world that God created for us. That’s why when God has a dispute with humanity, the matter is not heard in a court of this world, before a human judge and jury. It is not heard in the courts of heaven, before angels and archangels. It is not even heard before God, because in this case, God is a party in the dispute. God is the complainant, the one with the controversy against the people of God. And it is Israel, the people of God, who are the defendants, called to answer the case brought against them.

And the judges in the case are the mountains and the hills and the foundations of the earth. Because this is a matter that goes back, in C S Lewis’s words, to “the stillness and the darkness before time dawned.” It deals with things that lie at the heart of what it means to be God’s creatures, living in God’s creation, living in God’s kingdom, living under God’s rule. And so it must be judged by elements of creation that go back to the dawn of time.

The complaint that God brings against the people of God is in two parts. Firstly, that they have distorted what it means to live under God’s rule. And secondly, that they have sought to respond to the saving acts of the Lord in flawed and foolish ways – through burnt-offerings, and the sacrifice of thousands of rams, and the presentation of exorbitant amounts of precious oil, or even through human sacrifice: *my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul* Micah 6:6-7.

And so the complaint is heard. And the hearing ends, not with judgement and a sentence, but with a statement and a rhetorical question, that echo to the ends of the earth and to all eternity.

The statement: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good.* And the rhetorical question: *what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8.

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. That pretty much puts an end to the controversy that the LORD has with his people. There's not much to argue with there, not much that needs judicial interpretation or legal explanation. And not much wiggle room for the people of God, or any people for that matter, to make excuses for not doing justice, or loving kindness, or walking humbly with God.

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. There is a kind of cumulative build through these three phrases to the last one. Because the last one really is the key one, the one which gives reason and meaning to the other two: walk humbly with God.

Walk humbly with God. In her commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Carol Dempsey writes this:

Only when one walks humbly with God will one come to learn and understand how to do justice and love kindness . . . To walk humbly with God implies an attitude of personal integrity, candour, and honesty. God's people are called to godliness and to live out the fullness of justice and love.

But doing justice and loving kindness, even while we are walking humbly with God, does not mean living passively, living a life of humility and meekness. There are times when doing justice and loving kindness require courage, resolve and strength of heart and mind.

There was a thought-provoking article on the Maclean's website that I read a couple of weeks ago. It was headed "Why we need to swear more – the importance of swear words and why we can no longer describe our current world using polite vocabulary alone." The pulpit is not the place for some of the language that the author used, but I will read you this:

. . . here is the most important reason why I think we should be swearing more: the times require it. Has there ever been an age when we have so needed to turn our faces to the sky and let loose? We simply cannot accurately describe our current world if we limit ourselves to polite vocabulary alone.

I told this story only a couple of months ago, but I make no apologies for telling it again, even if I still don't know whether it is a true story or not. It is said that General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was only once heard to swear. It was when he was given a report of a study that the Army had commissioned on child prostitution in Victorian London. When he finished reading it, he closed it, started to pound his fist on his desk, and said, 'Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.'

And under his leadership, the Salvation Army began a campaign that led to Parliament to take action and introduce legislation aimed at stopping child-trafficking.

Doing justice and loving kindness can be tough, challenging things to live out. But they are things that every follower of Jesus Christ who is worthy to be called a follower of Jesus Christ is called to do. How can we follow that other great directive for ethical living if we do not?

Luke 10:25-28

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ²⁶He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁸And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'