

Micah 6: 6-8 “What’s God Want?” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/17/24 At around 5 or 6 years old, I remember my daughter Mikayla getting in trouble and having her stuffed purple dinosaur Barney taken away for a week. Crying in her room, she turned to me and said, “I knew what I was doing was wrong, so why did I do it?” I said that would be a question she would probably ask herself more than a few times in her lifetime. Being both pastor and mom, I said, “God gave us the ability to choose right or wrong; sometimes a voice inside of us leads us to do something we know is bad and we listen to it over God’s voice that tries to lead us to do good.” She puckered her face in a pout and said, “Well, that’s cuz God doesn’t speak loud enough!”

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, are all about magnifying God’s voice to reach our deaf ears. At the beginning of Micah, chapter 6, the prophet says, “Stand, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear your voice.” The scene is set immediately –we are in a courtroom, almost 2800 years ago, as Micah tells us Yahweh has a bone to pick with us. Yahweh asks, “What have I done to you, my children, how have I exhausted you so much that now you turn away from me? All I have ever desired to do is release, redeem and save you, even though you continue to find your way back into bondage, placing yourselves in harm’s way.” God first blames God’s self for the evils present in Israel which is such a parent-like thing to do. No matter how old my daughters get, I still have a hard time separating their actions and decisions from the way I raised them early on. God does the same thing, but we learn quickly that it’s not Yahweh’s fault that Israel has gone bad. Then, as so often happens to children when confronted by a beloved parent, the child becomes defensive. “Well, what do you want from me? Should I give you my most valuable possessions? Will you be happy with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Not enough? Fine, then, how about my firstborn child – that enough for you, great and mighty God?” The exaggerated and ridiculous suggestions about God’s desires indicate they have missed the mark – young calves, hordes of rams, rivers of sacred oil, and human sacrifices are not what God wants. The fact that these sorts of things were actually done in Israel, as various scriptures suggest, got Micah in a

boatload of trouble as he makes clear that it has never been about giving such things. What Yahweh wants is so much simpler, less complicated, than we could ever imagine.

Verse 8 becomes one of the most quoted scriptures in the Hebrew texts. Micah says, “God has told you, O human one, what is good and what the Lord requires of you. But very well, I will remind you again. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” That’s it – the words are so easy, the truth is so profound. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. But what does it mean? Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says to act justly means to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them. Abraham Lincoln didn’t give freedom to the slaves, he returned to them the freedom of which they never should have been deprived. In 1948, Great Britain didn’t grant independence to India, it returned to them the independence that was theirs from the beginning, just as much as any citizen of Great Britain. When in the future, Americans come to see food and a roof over one’s heads as moral rights worthy of the same legal protection that we give free speech and freedom of the press, it will signal that American social awareness, presently so uninformed, is reaching a level more reflective of Micah’s. Seeing the world through the eyes of God, the prophet understood how power and wealth often deprives people of what belongs to them, because others have absconded what wasn’t theirs, seized more than their share. Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them. It is an act of redefining the world. It is intervening and turning around the social order which has distorted the good, resorted to violence, and neglected the well-being of those we heard Matthew speak of last week, “the least of these.” As in Micah’s day, sometimes these acts come from none other than religious leaders themselves, who are blind to the destruction they are creating, not wanting to see the reality they have erected.

A story is told about a group of Harvard students who were preparing for the ministry and given a final exam on Immanuel Kant, a German moral philosopher, who wrote many notable papers on the existence of God, ethics, metaphysics and much more. For as much influence as he still has in these fields, he never grew rich from his

efforts. In fact, he spent several years as an unsalaried professor only paid by his students who attended his lectures. Thus, he needed to teach an enormous amount of classes and attract many students just to earn a living. The students were given 2 hours to write on Kant's moral imperative with a 10 minute break in the middle. During the break, the students went out into the hallway, and there in the hallway was another student, not part of their class, sitting disheveled and slumped on the floor. The students busied themselves talking, getting water, going to the bathroom, and went back into the classroom for the second hour of detailing what it meant to be a moral human being as Kant advocated. Weeks later, the theological students received their scores and they all failed. They had thought they were being graded on their writings, but in fact the professor had been standing in the hallway during the break and grading them on who approached the man slumped on the floor in obvious need. Nobody did – no one even inquired what the man had lost that led him to be there, nor offered to provide what might restore his dignity. Acting justly involves sorting out what belongs to whom and returning it to them.

Next God asks us to love mercy, to be kind and love tenderly. This is counterintuitive to a culture such as ours which values autonomy, the strength to stand alone, and the capacity to act independently. A group of salesmen were at a regional week-long sales meeting in Chicago which went overtime and they were all in a rush on Friday afternoon to catch their plane to get home to their families. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently knocked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping, they all reached the plane in time and heaved a huge sigh of relief. All but one. He paused and looked at the young girl whose apple stand had been overturned; she was blind. He gathered up the apples and noticed that several had been battered or bruised. As he saw the flight attendant close the breezeway to his flight, he pulled out a 20 and said, "Here, please take this 20 dollars for the damage we did. I hope it didn't spoil your day." As he headed for the airline customer service, the confused girl called out to him, "Are you Jesus?" He stopped in mid-stride and wondered, maybe it was she in fact who was Jesus. Far too little

attention is paid to the virtues of dependence, interdependence, and the capacity to be vulnerable. When we drop our defensiveness, we can learn, or maybe unlearn, the lessons which have kept us from being vulnerable to one another. So I envision us all learning to live more deeply in this church family, and it being a place where we love tenderly, fiercely, and tenaciously, starting with a willingness to be vulnerable.

Walking humbly with your God is the only way to walk if you think about it. Being humble isn't thinking less of yourself, it is thinking about yourself less. It takes practice as we strive to be free from pride and arrogance. Jesus modeled for us this practice as he held power, but he used it solely to empower others. He healed, but with no strings attached. He stood tall, but not by making others cringe or feel small. We walk in humility as Jesus walked. As Richard Rohr notes, Jesus encouraged our giving and religious practices to be done in private not in public, where we can get hung up on what others think of us. The need for human approval and flattery only keeps us enslaved to a hall of mirrors where we are always watching how we compare and compete with others. Jesus competed with none and loved all, even when we were the least lovable. It boils down to this, Micah says: "O human, this is what God desires for you. That you do justice. That you love kindness. That you walk humbly in the presence of your God." The prophet turns a religious question into a human question. Whereas many like to talk of Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus preferred calling himself the Son of Man or Humanity. Brian McLaren explains that "Son of" means the "essence of" or perhaps a "new generation of." Jesus is saying he represents the essence of humanity, a new generation of humanity. Ultimately, that is what God wants; for us to follow Jesus toward a new way of being human. That type of human is one who aspires to be humble enough to receive mercy, seeking to know yourself as vulnerable and interdependent. That human is kind, because the person next to you, the one you may think is wrong, is part of your family, part of your story, and more like you than you'd like to admit. That human is just using power for the common good, so that all will experience dignity and justice. Pro-justice, pro-mercy, pro-humility – the new order awaits you and me.