

“O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee”

Micah 6:3-8

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‘O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

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.

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.’

‘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?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,

the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

He 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?

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Can you hear the desperation in those words from the people of Israel in the middle of our passage this morning? The people of God want to know what it takes to please God. And the longer they talk, the higher they think the price tag is getting for making God happy. They start by suggesting an unspecified burnt offering, then they get more specific with calves that are a year old. Is that not enough God? How about thousands of rams? How about TENS of thousands of rivers of oil? What about the fruit of my own body, my firstborn child? Their anxiety about where they stand with God escalates quickly as they ask: When will I have done enough to earn God's love?

I wonder if that anxious question about earning God's love resonates with you. More now than ever before, with access to the internet and a hungry 24-hour-news cycle, the suffering of our world is constantly on our doorstep. I've actually gotten used to a heavy feeling of guilt on my shoulders because of all the things I have - my white privilege, a feeling of financial security, my health, an amazing family - while people all over the world and my own community seem overwhelmed by suffering. Maybe you feel this heaviness too. As a result I'm often filled with that same anxiety I hear in the voices of the people of Israel - In light of all this suffering, what is my responsibility? When will I have done enough to please you, God? If I sign up for that shift at the cold-weather shelter, God, will that satisfy you? What if I give you double what I normally do in my charitable gift to that service organization? What if I sell my house and give the proceeds to families who need it? My anxiety escalates as I ask: When will I have done enough to earn God's love?

But the problem for the people of Israel, and for us, is that this anxiety has led us to ask the wrong question. For to ask what we must do to earn God's favor is to assume that God's natural attitude towards us is anger, disappointment, and a cold distant gaze that is waiting for us to prove we are worthy. But if we back up to the first few verses of our passage, we will find God's reminder of all that God did in saving Israel before they could lift a finger to earn it. "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery;" God says, "and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 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" (Micah 6:4-5). Before Israel could even think of "pleasing" God, God had already acted in reckless love to save them from slavery, to give them great leaders to guide them, and then to intervene in some difficult situations to bring them into paths of life. All that they may "know the saving acts of the Lord" for them, God's beloved.

So the question the prophet Micah wants us to ask is not "What is the checklist of things do I need to complete in order to be loved by God?" The question for us is instead "How can I live as the beloved child of God *I already am*?" You cannot earn your identity as God's beloved. God was moving towards you with saving love long before you could move towards God. But you can accept God's invitation to live like the beloved child God has already made you to be. Is it that simple? Yes. Is it easy to live as one who is confident that they are God's beloved while remaining present to the suffering of our world? That's another question all together.

And it is a question I had in the back of my mind as I learned about Washington Gladden, the pastor who wrote the hymn we are focusing on today, “O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee.” If you want, go ahead and open your hymnals to #738 to take a look at the words. These words are so intimate. They speak of a personal relationship with God. A line from the 3rd verse is a great example: “Teach me thy patience, still with thee in closer, dearer company...” Or this line from verse 2: “Teach me the wayward feet to stay, and guide them in the homeward way.” Or this line from verse 1: “Tell me thy secret; help me bear the strain of toil, the fret of care.” Intimacy. Close connection. A deep relationship with a God who keeps dear company, who guides feet, who shares with God’s beloved a precious secret. It was obvious to me that for Gladden to write this, he must have been firmly rooted in his identity as God’s dear child. I assumed that he must have been someone who lived a monastic life of some kind, filling his days with worship services and hours of solitary prayer, who was shut away from the world in order to simply focus on being with God in the quiet places of the soul.

But I couldn’t have been more wrong with that assumption. Gladden was a congregationalist pastor who served for 32 years at First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio beginning in 1882.¹ He was the first leading religious figure in the United States to support the unionization of the workforce. He was a leader in the Social Gospel movement, which essentially advocated for Christian values of justice and mercy to be made manifest in America’s public sphere so that the most marginalized communities could begin to thrive. His church actually stood just

¹ “Washington Gladden,” *Hymnary*, https://hymnary.org/person/Gladden_Washington .

opposite the Ohio state capitol. There were plenty of legislators and other power-players in his congregation and Gladden saw this as his particular calling: to use his pulpit to speak boldly against injustices taking place in the halls of power and encourage the politicians in his congregation to leverage their influence on behalf of those whose rights were being threatened.

Gladden lived his theology right out loud in the public sphere, advocating for the poor in the halls of power. So I got curious: How did the intimate relationship with Jesus he described in “O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee” relate to his lifetime of outward expressions of God’s justice and mercy? I love what I found as I followed that curiosity. Gladden was quoted to have said once that religion is “summed up in the word Friendship”: friendship “with the Father above and the brother by our side.”² It seems that Gladden’s friendship with God is what fueled his lifelong efforts to extend that friendship in acts of justice and mercy to those who had become “brothers”, family, to him in the person of Jesus. Gladden did not frantically run around trying to solve every problem in his community out of some sense of anxiety about whether he was doing enough to earn God’s love. I don’t think he ran at all. It sounds to me like he *walked* humbly with his God, his master who invited him on a step-by-step journey of friendship. And perhaps it was that intimate friendship that sustained him to do the particular work *he* was called to do (no more and no less) for over 30 years right across from the Ohio state capitol building. Gladden could do justice and love mercy, not as someone trying desperately to earn God’s love, but

² Washington Gladden, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Gladden .

as God's beloved child, walking humbly with their dear friend, their master, Jesus.

Friends, if you are weary and weighed down by the suffering that surrounds you, hear this: You are not called to run around out of some anxiety that you will never be enough saying yes to every service opportunity, to every good cause, to every open wound that needs tending in our world. That anxiety has nothing to do with God, and those fearful messages are never spoken in God's voice.

You have been God's beloved since before time began and your calling is different. You are called to walk in friendship with God, the kind of friendship Gladden speaks of in the hymn we are about to sing. The kind of friendship where you walk right next to this One who made you, enjoying God's company and soaking in God's love. Spend time praying in the quiet. Find spaces to sing to God and speak those words of liturgy that remind us of who we are. Dig into God's word and wrestle with what it says. Go outside and find God in blooming rhododendrons and blue skies. Those spaces are quality time with God. And friendships need quality time to thrive. The time you spend with God there is never a waste. It is in friendship with God that you will be led to your particular work (no more and no less) so that you can do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God your whole life long. It is in friendship with God that you will be filled, in the words of our hymn, with the peace that only God can give, that with your friend, your master, you may live. Amen.

I invite you now to stand in body or in spirit to sing together #738, "O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee."