

Sermon – “What the Lord Requires
Sunday, January 29, 2017
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. The Word of the Lord:

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, 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 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 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 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: “What the Lord Requires”

The text: “...what does the Lord require of you...” Micah 6:8a

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

Accountability is a good thing and today we at Westminster Presbyterian Church hold one another accountable in the presentation of the 2016 Annual Report. Our hope and prayer is that among the important and sometimes tedious details within this report, we get a glimpse of a faith community invested in the work of justice and kindness with humility. 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. 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. Human sacrifice was never allowed in Israelite religion and the prophets spoke sharply against it.

Micah seeks to clarify what God requires. Rather than being consumed with religious practices that justify oneself, people of faith are expected to *do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God.*

Not unlike Micah, Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount sought to 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 and their own righteousness than blessing the ones whose lives need healing and comfort. In the beatitudes Jesus offers hope, blessing and wholeness to *those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted.*

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.*

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 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. To walk humbly is both active in faith and grounded in spirit. Only when one learns to "walk the walk" of humility will one understand how to do justice and love 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. According to theologian Walter Brueggemann, *to do justice is to actively engage in the redistribution of power and to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others.*

Last Sunday we touched on some of the tasks of fishing as Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John from their boats, highlighting the tedious and detailed work of mending nets. This discipline of repairing threads worn out from the waves and wind seems an apropos metaphor for the healing of lives torn apart by the wear and tear, the conflict and tragedy on the sea of life.

Six months into my call as your pastor I came across a poem entitled "Dutch Interior" written by Pieter de Hooch in the 17th century. The poet reflects on a painting, perhaps a Vermeer, during the century the Dutch Naval fleet was the largest and most powerful in the world. He describes the ordered home of a grieving widow who lost her beloved at sea and how the discipline of mending clothes sustains her. Listen to selected verses.

*I recognize the quiet and the charm,
This safe enclosed room where a woman sews
And life is tempered, orderly, and calm.*

Through the Dutch door, half-open, sunlight remains...

This is a room where I have lived as woman,

*Lived too what the Dutch painter does not tell—
The wild skies overhead, dissolving, breaking,
And how that broken light is never still.*

*And how the roar of waves is always near,
What bitter tumult, treacherous and cold,
Attacks the solemn charm year after year!*

*Bent to her sewing, she looks drenched in calm.
Raw grief is disciplined to the fine thread.
But in her heart this woman is a storm;*

*Alive, deep in herself, holds wind and rain,
Remaking chaos into an intimate order
Where sometimes light flows through a windowpane.*

I was particularly touched by this poem. Growing up in an orderly, neat, scrubby Dutch home lovingly tended by my Dutch mother, I recognize some of the same stoicism in her as this 17th

century poem portrays. That is, the ability and discipline to hold one's emotions within, thereby creating a calm rather than adding to the chaos and storm. Not unlike the dikes that held back the sea surrounding the Netherlands, over time the Dutch nurtured an inner fortitude to hold back the sea from within themselves. My mom's wise words "It is not how you feel, it is how you look!" remind us that how we present ourselves to others is as important as what we feel inside.

Last week we also talked about the fish metaphor taking on a life of its own for the early followers of Christ who were forced underground and persecuted for their beliefs. The practice of drawing a fish discretely on the road with one's sandal became the secret handshake of the People of the Way, a practice passed on by oral tradition.

Last fall I learned of another symbol of solidarity, likewise passed on by oral tradition. During World War II members of the Dutch resistance wore a safety pin discretely hidden under a collar or the hem of a skirt, which communicated "You are safe with me!" This practice was not limited to the resistance, however. Children, grandparents, mothers, fathers and anyone at risk as well as their advocates wore the safety pin not just as an act of defiance against the storm of injustice in their midst but as a metaphor for the hope, freedom and blessings on those who were being persecuted.

The story of the safety pin and the Dutch resistance is especially poignant this week in the commemoration of the International Holocaust Remembrance on Friday, January 27. May we never forget the atrocity, injustice and persecution of European Jews. The need for continued safety and respect for people of all faiths is evident in the news this morning of the burning of the Mosque in Victoria, Texas. May we hold fast as a community of faith and a nation of citizens and together seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, the God who blesses, keeps safe and mends the lives of the meek, the poor, the mourning, and the persecuted. Thus is what the Lord requires! Amen.