

“HOW ARE WE TO LIVE? II – DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS,
WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD”

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Micah 6:1-8

Well, now that Christmas is over a new season has started for a lot of young people around us – it’s called “college application” time. If they didn’t apply for early admission, now is the time a lot of young people are scrambling to fill out applications, get references, write essays and so on. There’s a lot of pressure on them. I know there’s a lot more pressure on them than there was on me when I applied for college. Back then, you just took the SATs – didn’t prepare for them, and certainly didn’t study for them, or take a class on how to take them – we just took them – and no, I will not tell you what I got on them – it makes me shudder to this day!

Back then, I don’t even remember having to write any essays – we just filled out an application, sent it in, and crossed our fingers. Today, it seems to be a whole different story – it seems to me like the stakes are somehow higher – the pressure certainly is higher.

And I think the pressure is higher for young people to be certain about what they want to do with their lives – which I think is incredibly sad – because who really is certain when they’re a teenager what they absolutely, positively want to do with their life? I talked to several people this week who are so stressed because they’re not sure what they want to do, and everybody is pushing them to decide.

It’s tough figuring out what you want to do for the rest of your life. I remember after getting my Bachelor’s degree, and not being able to find a job with my degree in history, I went to a career counselor, who, after giving me some tests, told me I would be happy in a “helping profession.”

Later on, when I was in candidacy for ministry, like all ministerial candidates, I had to do an inventory of my gifts for ministry, and what possible field of ministry I might pursue – like pastor of a local church, or missionary, or pastoral counselor, or, by the way, a prophet.

Now, I can tell you, that anyone who has read the scriptures, particularly the Hebrew scriptures like the one we heard this morning, would be hard pressed to choose being a prophet as their career (not that one chooses where God will call you). But being a prophet is hard work – really hard, really challenging, really

tough work! You never end up on anyone's popularity list, you always irritate people, you always make people mad, and sometimes your neck is on the line, because you're always upsetting the apple cart.

Enter Micah – today's prophet. You might not know a whole lot about Micah, because he's a minor prophet, not like the big guys, like Isaiah. He was actually a contemporary of Isaiah's – they both prophesied during the 8th century BC. Micah was from a little town called Moresheth, about 20 miles away from Jerusalem.

When Micah began his prophetic ministry, Isaiah had already been prophesying for some twenty years. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) had already been destroyed, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was teetering on the edge of destruction. Both Isaiah and Micah saw that if Judah didn't start straightening up and flying right, the same fate would be theirs as well.

Ironically, Judah had just experienced some good times – really good times. They had prosperity and peace, and rather than those things drawing them closer to God, they drew further and further away from Him, and more focused upon themselves. They got caught up in “the good life” and turned away from God.

It was all about them, and what would profit them – which meant that anyone who got in the way of their prosperity would be stepped on, ignored, abused. And that's what was happening. Poor workers were suffering at the hands of powerful landlords. The rich got richer, while the poor got poorer. Civility was going by the wayside – it was every man or woman for himself or herself. Times, though outwardly they looked good, in reality, were not. And Micah was called by God to take them to task.

In this morning's passage, as Rick said, God is angry with the people, and frankly, He's hurt by their actions. The first part of the passage is God speaking to the people – and he asks them why they are being this way? It's actually very sad – “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?” And then He goes on to remind them that He brought them to freedom out of the horrors of slavery, and gave them gifted leaders like Moses and Aaron. And then He waits for their reply.

The reply is also actually very sad – for the people seem to not have a clue. “What do you want from us God? Do you want elaborate worship, burnt offerings, sacrifices on the altar, our firstborn children?” It's almost ridiculous, very child-like, over the top.

And then, comes the answer – plain and simple, really – God doesn't want fancy worship, or elaborate sacrifices, or incredible displays of affection – here is

what God wants of you, people – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

It is really rather plain and simple – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. It's about remembering what's really important. It's about looking outside of yourself instead of always being focused on yourself. It's about keeping things in perspective, and keeping God at the forefront of it all. That's what God wanted of the people of Judah in the days of Micah, and still, that's what God wants of you and me as well – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

So let's take a look at those things for just a few minutes this morning.

Do justice. The people in Micah's day had become really good at looking the other way, and ignoring injustice all around them. As I said earlier, poor workers were being used and abused at the hands of wealthy landowners. Other such abuses were going on all over society, but no one was saying or doing anything because frankly, they benefited from the system as it was.

The same might be said of us today. We too get comfortable with the way things are, especially if we directly or indirectly are benefiting from it. As Christians, God calls us to be on the side of justice for all. So, what that means practically, is not just feeding and housing the homeless during our work at the Rotating Homeless Shelter – it also means actively working to change the systems that cause people to be homeless in the first place – advocating for living wages, and affordable housing, for example. That's doing justice.

It's not easy, and it very often will take us out of our comfort zones – especially if, as I said earlier, we are beneficiaries of the unjust systems. Who among us wants to stand up and cause controversy, or rock the boat, or garner attention? Probably very few of us. Sometimes, doing justice means doing just that – but it is for the sake of all of God's people – that all of God's people might know life in all its fullness.

As one writer put it so well – “Doing justice is an act of courage as well as an act of devotion to God.” (On-line, “The Voice,” Jan. 30, 2011)

Micah says – to be the people God called you to be, first do justice.

Secondly, love kindness – and oh, I don't know how badly the world in Micah's day needed to hear that, but I know we sure do. I am constantly amazed by the spirit of people these days – how easily they turn mean, and ugly – how short fuses seem to be. Don't believe me? Get in your car and go shopping sometime. First of all, don't be surprised by the looks and perhaps gestures and words you

hear from other drivers – especially those who are in a hurry. I’m constantly astounded by horns being beeped, and certain digits being raised, and people yelling at one another over who’s turning first, or who got to a parking spot first, or who’s going too fast or too slow. Then, get into the store, and hear people berating employees, or complaining about long lines, or pushing and shoving to get the latest “it” product. It’s a rough world out there, at least in terms of kindness.

We, as children of God, are called to love kindness and share kindness with the world – and at the root of it all, is the fact that we respect all of humankind, all of God’s children. We share kindness that their lives might be better – and as a result, we find ours are better as well.

The other day, while I was in the middle of writing this sermon, I happened to have to go to the post office, and when I did, I remembered something I had read and used in a sermon a long time ago. It was the story of a woman named Mamie Adams. Mamie always went to a little post office in her hometown. One year, at Christmas time, she got there, and found the line was almost out the door. All she needed to do was buy stamps, but she stood there in that long line anyway. She struck up a conversation with a woman standing in line with her, and happened to mention that she was just buying stamps. The woman said to her, “Oh, you don’t have to wait in this long line – there’s a stamp machine right over there.” To which Mamie replied, “I know, but that machine won’t ask me about my arthritis.” (Online, sermonillustrations.com)

Kindness matters. A little bit of kindness, as the saying goes, goes a long way. All of us need to be treated with kindness, and you know what it feels like when someone talks to you, looks you in the eye, says a good or encouraging word – it makes you feel like you matter, it can change your whole day.

The people in Micah’s day seem to have forgotten that, and sadly, so many in our world today, seem to have forgotten it as well – but friends, we have this word from God to remind us – so love kindness, and practice it freely and daily.

Finally, walk humbly with your God, Micah says. Walk humbly with your God. The people of Judah had dropped humility somewhere along the way. They were so successful, they thought it was because of their own efforts, and they forgot what God had done for them. It was all about them, and it was about to be their downfall.

Do you remember when, years ago, I told you about something that happened to Walter Cronkite one day when he was sailing with his wife on their sailboat on the Mystic River in Connecticut? A boatful of young people sped past them, and all of them were shouting to them and waving their arms. Cronkite waved back at them cheerily and then his wife asked him, “Did you hear what they were

shouting?” He said, “Why yes! It was ‘Hello Walter.’” “No,” his wife replied, “they were shouting ‘low water, low water.’” (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

It’s easy to forget humility, especially when things are going well. It’s easy to forget that it was God who helped the good things come about, it was God who was there all the time, it was God who was the source of it all. Walking humbly means acknowledging that, giving God thanks for that, and continuing to walk with Him all along the way.

The famous inventor Samuel Morse was once asked if he ever encountered situations where he didn’t know what to do. He responded, “More than once, and whenever I could not see my way clearly, I knelt down and prayed to God for light and understanding.” Morse received many honors for his invention of the telegraph but felt undeserving of those honors. This is what he said about it: “I have made a valuable application of electricity not because I was superior to other men but solely because God, who meant it for mankind, must reveal it to someone, and He was pleased to reveal it to me.” (On-line, sermonillustrations.com, Tim Hansel, *Eating Problems for Breakfast*)

Humility – keeping one’s life and one’s accomplishments in perspective, and giving credit to the One to whom credit is due – God Himself.

Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God – that is what God requires of us – and that is what leads to life – the full, real, abundant and eternal life that God has prepared for us in Christ Jesus. So may we strive to live as Micah and God invite us to live. May it be so.

Amen.