

The Basics

Menno Mennonite Church
January 29, 2023

Purpose: To remind ourselves of the fundamental ask of God's way.

Message: As people of God's way we are invited to rely on the simplicity of God's grace as we seek to follow along.

Scriptures: Micah 6:1-8 (I will read); Psalm 15 (Please read/Have Read)

Synopsis: These words from Micah are innately familiar to us. They are likely among the most quoted and quotable of the modern canon. "What does the Lord require of you" is one of those call and response sort of chants that provide the backbone of our scriptural and liturgical orientation. What we seldom hear is the proceeding commentary that brings us to this point—the case of YHWH V Israel on the charge of gross neglect and dereliction of duty. What needs tending here is not the work of the law, but rather the central practices in response to God's way—the way of grace. God's expectations are simple—to do justice (Mish'pat in the Hebrew—more like the equitable distribution of all goods and resources), to love Hesed (an untranslatable notion which is better translated as divine love/divine nature) and to walk *continuously* with our God. These are words of Grace, mercy, and hope, words to live by, and grace to us beyond all that could be expected.

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Micah 6:1-8

6 Hear what the Lord says:
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;

for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he 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.

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 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?”

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?

If you are looking for a bumper sticker line for faith, this reading from Micah may well be it. Were I to prompt you with the question on any given Sunday: “And what does the Lord require of You?” chances are you are going to chorus back the rest of the line. It is a nice, handy summary of the working of faith, and the way that we are called to join in with God is doing along the way. It is never a bad test to hold up against oneself and your life: is what I am about Just? Merciful? Does it bring me humbly along the way set out by God? It is never bad to answer yes to those queries, and if the answer is no and honestly so, it might be something you want to spend some time considering what you have in mind. All around it is a favorite and resonate passage that seems comfortably worn. To be sure the danger of engaging this text seems to lie in its commonality—as in is there anything new to say about it or around it—then particularly in where it leads us in finding something new. It is tempting to keep this as a book mark verse—those that we know and love, that keep us comfortable and warm when we need it, but have little else to say into our life and living.

All of this is least true of the part of this that we know—verse 8. That’s the important bit, and the one that we hold on to. After all, When you are looking for the nutshell distillation of the ethics of the bible, you are not going to spend a whole lot of time with the icky cranky prophetic bits along the way. We want the moral, but not really the story. Yet by divorcing the text as carefully as we do I think we miss the overriding point riding within: the message of grace.

Which might seem odd when we read this first and foremost as a court case. The is YHWH vs the people—the law has been broken and there is God in the dock asking the questions. We recognize the form. Surely we have seen enough Parry Mason and Law and Order our lives to know how it works. Cast into this setting, we know something dramatic is going to come out. Because we know that court is a dramatic place.

We cast the characters fairly simply. Israel is the defendant and God, being the supreme arbiter of justice, is the prosecutor, just like we always draw the lines up between us and God. We do this because, simply that is how we understand the law and prophets to work. God sets the rules and the people of God break the rules and are labial for the breach. The prophets especially do this with their pronunciation of the sentence of what is about to come and the way that the people are to suffer.

But I am not convinced that this is the case here. I think it is God who is on trial here in this argument, or rather YHWH who is taking the argument up. The fundamental issue here

between God and the people has to do with the relationship between God and the people. YHWH seems to be answering the charge already made against God (Israel always seems to have a charge against God), making a counter claim against the people. It would seem that Israel has once again leveled the charge of dereliction of duty onto the protector and provider of Israel, of burdening them with expectations they simply cannot fulfill. This is about the God-people relationship, and the impartial jury of nature itself is asked to give ear, and this is no mere academic argument about the violation of some divine statute or another, or the meaning of some jot and tittle of the Law. No; this is the passionate conversation between the beloved people and their God as God passionately insists on their answer, full of emotion for the brokenness that has brought them to this sorry conversation. This is about a broken relationship, not about broken law. God's rhetoric suggests that this is a response to the accusations leveled against YHWH, crying "Oh, my people, what have I done to you... Answer me!" God is putting the issue on the table and asking how this behavior fits within the relationship that has been thus far. This may well have the form of a court case, but also the passion of a relationship fight if there ever was one.

This change of position is quite remarkable. When we think of divine law-and-order we think of the misdeeds that we have done placing us under the judgement of God most high—the only fully and finally just judgement there ever has been or ever will be. But that doesn't mean that we don't try it on the other way around. We see the world as it is, the circumstances of our lives, our living, and we wonder silently and out loud how this could be real, how this could be just. We cry out to God seeking answers. We cry out to God in anger. We put God on trial all the time. Perhaps not as starkly as what this prophetic imagery entails here, but this is a very real thing in the life of faith. I remember questioning whether my baptism was authentic in college given the number of questions I was carrying around. I am here to tell you: baptism is far more like a marriage—something to be lived in all things and held as holy, not just when we are feeling particularly in love with the other. We argue with God and God engaged with us, and is changed by us. Think about Abraham arguing against the destruction of Sodom. Think about Moses arguing with God about his ability to represent Israel before Pharaoh. God does not dismiss their complaining as inappropriate or bring them into court because they have dared to question God! On the contrary, God develops reasons as to why they should be appreciative of God's activity in their story even though life has been difficult, providing a brief history of the

relationship thus far from the prophets and prophetesses who have lead them to the moments of salvation that have brought them to this point of them being able to complain about it “so that they might remember” how central this relationship is.

With that, the defense rests, and the people respond, noting the high price of salvation these days. Surely, it is said, the cost of all this saving must come to quite a bill. Calves, rivers of oil, sacrifices of that which is most dear to them, their first born of their flesh, must be what God requires of us. One must wonder whether this menu of worship actions listed here are just the going price for God worship these days, or whether these are the hyperbolic claims of those who want to get a clear answer from God. Because the deep secret that many of us hold is that when it comes to keeping God happy, we never really know if we can ever measure up. We think that the price will always be too high, the demands too painful, the rituals too exacting to ever satisfy God. I often wonder how much of our issues with the divine stem from our need to project our own self-doubt and individually manufactured inadequacies onto God, reasoning that if I think I am this bad, what must God think of me? Knowing grace, living grace, and trusting grace is among the most difficult tasks of faith we go through on a day to day basis. We don't trust love because at the end of the day, there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn it, nothing we can provide to illicit it, and therefore, there is nothing we can do to ensure that it will be there when we need it except to trust it.

Valentines is coming up. This is your reminder. Laying aside the problems of commemorating love with candy and commercialism on a saint day of someone who was beheaded, there is something revealing about the day. The suggestion is made (none too subtly), that for love to exist and be viable it has be given expression in the greatest form that we can muster. And if we don't we stand to disappoint the demands of love by not paying its price in the form of roses and all the rest. Sure; if you forget the day entirely, you are rightly taken to task for not making the connections of remembering the date. But if that forgetting does lasting harm to romance, one must question its foundation in the first place. How much effort do we put in to erecting systems and solutions for the problem of paying for that which is ultimately completely and utterly free? We do this in our relationships all the time and even more so, with in our relationship with God.

We forget that like a parent amazed at the paste-spotted construction paper heart scrawled by their child, God stands and remains in love with us. No matter what. No matter what we yell

in God's general direction. No matter how fiercely we shake our fist at God. God requires only the basics from us: That we do Justice—the equitable sharing of the which is God's with others of God's love, that we love Mercy—actually Chesed in the Hebrew which is an all-but untranslatable word encompassing God's love for the people; and that we walk humbly; more accurately continually with God.

It comes down to this. In grace, we are expected to share that which we have, to join God in loving all of God's creation, and to continue to be in relationship with the author of that love. The first two of these basic commands will ensure the third almost by definition. Because if we are doing the stuff that God is about, we will be in relationship with God in the end.

It is we who erect expectations for ourselves. It is our own needs for self-justification that drives us to extremes of judgment, guilt, and shame. I know this is true for my life. I expect I am not alone in this. We always want to try hard, but we cannot try so much that we forget that we need to return, ultimately and frequently to the underlying grace that is the core of Love. I think if we were but better able to live the law of grace in our lives, we would be far more happy, for more coherent as a church, and for closer to understanding the true meaning of God with us.

My friends, this is the what the Lord requires. All else is commentary. May we embrace this grace in big and small ways, celebrating God's wonderful grace. Amen.