

January 29, 2017  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Micah 6:1-8

### WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES

The last verse of today's Old Testament reading is one of very few that I have memorized. It varies a little among the many translations, but I know it as: **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?**

Many of you remember John Graham. This was his favorite verse. And he was the first to admit that for him, that last part about walking humbly was the hardest.

It is a well-known verse because it really sums up what we mean when we claim our place as the Covenant people of God. We believe God has called us into a covenant relationship with him and with each other. A covenant is a commitment that confers rights, benefits and obligations on each party to the agreement, but a covenant is more than a contract. It is a commitment to permanent, in this case eternal, relationship. Long ago, God spoke through the prophets and said I will be your God and you will be my people. And that covenant remains intact. Although we humans fail over and over to keep our end of the commitment, God does not abandon us. God continues to love us and care for us—continues to be our God and we continue to be his people.

What often gets overlooked when we refer to this verse is the context in which the prophet Micah was speaking. He lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, before the Babylonian conquest and subsequent exile. The rulers, the wealthy folks, the priests, the false prophets are living comfortable lives, supported by their oppressive rule over the lower classes. There was no safety net for abandoned, divorced and widowed women and their children. And if your home was destroyed by a natural disaster, there was no government help on the way. There was no social security, Medicare, Medicaid or any other kind of social program. The whole book of Micah is basically the voice of a loan prophet who is the only one *not* telling the king what he wants to hear.

Our passage today begins like this: **Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. <sup>2</sup> 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.** [It's a metaphor. God has set up the mountains and enduring foundations of the earth (whatever those are) as judges in a court of law and is bringing his case against his people before the court. God continues to plead his case:] **"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup> 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."** [You see, God is looking at these people who are living well, taking their privileges for granted while the poor among them are suffering. God is like: Can you tell me what part of being the Chosen people of God you don't get? You act like you can't be bothered with me. You act like I'm not the sole reason you are sitting on your thrones instead of slaving away in Egypt. God recounts some of his mighty acts—when they were in slavery, God sent them wise and just leaders, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (note one of the 3 holy leaders of the people is a woman). These leaders had courage and integrity and they spoke the truth to the people. They gave up their places of comfort and security for the greater good. Then God reminds them about various times when enemies tried to conquer them but the Lord prevailed against the enemies.

So, God has presented his case. And now these arrogant rich guys who run the country are like—what are you talking about—we worship you according to the Law of Moses. We conduct the rituals, we make the offering. They say: <sup>6</sup> **"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? <sup>7</sup> 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?"** They are getting sarcastic with God! Their response to God's criticism is hey, we're not doing anything wrong. We're not breaking any laws. What do you want from us, more burnt offerings? More, more, more. Is that what you demand of us God?

This is where things start to hit home for us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We come to church on Sunday morning. We sing our songs and we raise our prayers. Of course most of us have a little more respect for God than old Ahaz and his administration. We aren't going to say right out loud that we think God is a little too demanding, but we do think we're not that bad.

So then Micah steps in. He says, take a deep breath guys. Think instead of react. God doesn't want all those sacrifices and ritual offerings. God has no need of rivers of oil, much less your first born child for God's sake. Nope. <sup>8</sup> **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?**

*The Word of the Lord.*

It's not really about how you worship. Which songs you sing. Which prayers you say. Sure, gathering for worship is an essential activity of the Covenant people of God. But if we think that showing up on Sunday morning fulfills our covenant obligations, we are mistaken.

This month's Faith Food Friday subject was the death penalty. Knowing the typical personality of the collective audience who goes to FFF and having a general feel for the theological leanings of the individual members of the "God Squad" I didn't expect it would be a very controversial discussion. I was wrong. For those of you who are not familiar with FFF. It is an informal gathering on the first Friday of the month for a panel discussion, followed by an open mike opportunity for questions or comments. The panel—the God Squad—is made up of 2 mainstream protestant pastors (Methodist and Baptist), a Catholic priest, the pastor of a nondenominational predominantly African American church, and Rabbi Jack Romberg of Temple Israel. There is usually a guest panelist as well and that week the guest was another Catholic priest who has spent many years ministering to death row inmates.

Unfortunately, Rabbi Romberg was on a family vacation and wasn't present. I know from numerous conversations with him that Rabbi Jack is an anti-death penalty activist. But that isn't why his absence was unfortunate. He was sorely missed because he is far and away the most well versed, educated and articulate scholar of what we call the Old Testament that I have ever heard in my life. And when we Christians start interpreting Old Testament passages you had better know your stuff or he is going to set you straight. In a respectful and civilized way of course.

One of the five Christian clergy on the panel held the belief that the death penalty is authorized by Scripture. He relied mostly on passages in the Old Testament, that I was sure Jack would have dismantled easily. But he also said that we can infer from Jesus' lack of resistance to his own execution that Jesus did not oppose the death penalty. He repeatedly made his case by invoking the overarching Biblical mandate for justice. He argued that when heinous murder has been committed, leaving grieving, inconsolable loved ones behind, justice demands

death. From his perspective, the death penalty is not just acceptable, it is necessary to ensure that justice is done.

I'm pretty sure at least 90% of the people there were shocked and dismayed to hear that from a preacher. But guess what. Nobody got angry. Nobody ridiculed him. No one interrupted him or tried to talk over him. Nor was he rude, defensive or arrogant about his position. He is a soft-spoken, likeable guy who clearly has a heart for the poor and the oppressed, especially children. Even though I disagreed with him, I respected him for taking a position that was polar opposite of most of the people there.

During the open mike portion of the program, a member at Temple Israel spoke. He said he wished the Rabbi was present, and he felt inadequate to try to speak for him, but he said the conversation's emphasis on justice had brought this passage to mind, but he read a slightly different translation. **He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and show mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?** And the man asked rhetorically: Isn't death by definition the absence of opportunity to show mercy? And isn't a judgment of death imposed by humans rather than God, by the epitomy of arrogance rather than humility?

No one called him a liar. No one got outraged. No one told him he was stupid. Still, I doubt that the pro-death penalty folks there changed their minds. But this is the thing that keeps me coming back to FFF. People of faith can agree to disagree without anybody accusing anyone else of being evil.

It isn't always easy to know what exactly it means to do justice and love mercy. For people of faith, the death penalty is a complex justice issue. So is affordable health care. So is government supported aid to the poor. So is war. So is immigration. So is procreation. So is racism. It goes on and on and on. These are all complicated matters of justice. And they are all political issues.

It would be nice if we could just ignore them, especially when we come to church. But that is exactly what God says is not OK. The people of God must grapple with these issues. We must think it through. We must look at every political issue from the perspective of what is justice in the great scheme of things.

And then we must strive to do justice, show mercy and always, always walk humbly with God in this life. I'm with John Graham on this. As hard as it may be sometimes to do justice and show mercy, it is that last one that is the hardest. But it is what the Lord requires of us.