

Introduction

Some of the most memorable words in the Hebrew Scriptures are these from the prophet Micah:

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

In the passage that comes immediately before this text, we read about a Hebrew trial, and it's a very unusual trial. In this trial, the Lord is suing the people of Israel. The Lord calls on the hills and mountains to serve as witnesses in the trial. God challenges Israel to prove to the court that God has ever mistreated them. They cannot do that, for the Lord has been good to the covenant people.

But, the Lord tells the court, my people have mistreated me. They have been disloyal to me. I have delivered them from Egypt. I have protected them. I have given them a land of their own and leaders and laws. Nevertheless, they have become weary of me.

That is the Lord's accusation.

Rituals

What happens next is that a faithful Israelite replies to the Lord. By faithful I mean that this Israelite accepts the Lord's condemnation and turns away from his nation's sin. That is where our text begins. This unnamed Israelite asks the Lord a question: *How shall I come before the Lord?* He then goes through a series of possibilities. All of them concern making huge sacrifices to God. Is this what God wants of me? Does the Lord want me to offer an enormous number of animal sacrifices and food offerings?

The answer that the prophet gives is No. No, God does not want religious rituals and activities. That is not the point.

What God wants is justice, kindness, and humility.

Let us suppose that you and I were to say, along with that faithful Israelite, Lord, We are sorry. We are sorry that we have taken you for granted. We are sorry that we have sentimentalized your sacrificial love to us. We are sorry that we have domesticated your radical gospel about Jesus who accepts everyone. We are sorry that we have become weary of you.

If we did that, then we might say, All right. Now, what should we do? How shall we come before the Lord? Shall we built large church buildings? Shall we hold huge rallies and sing loudly to God? Shall we give a tenth of our income to God? Shall we go on mission trips? Shall we sponsor religious programs on television that reach millions and millions of people? What does the Lord require of us?

Sincerity and Morality

When we ask this, and only when we do, are we ready to hear Micah's great message in verse 8.

What he was saying is, "No." No, you do not understand how it is with the Lord. Of course, God respects your religious activities. But there are two things you need to know about them.

First, God respects religious activities only if they are expressions of what is in your heart. That is the sincerity issue.

Second, God respects what is in your heart only if it is lived out in your day-to-day life. Its expression in religious rituals alone is not acceptable to God. That is the morality issue.

Micah is calling us to sincerity and to morality. We who are God's covenant people must have sincerity of heart.

And we who have sincere hearts must live morally; religious rituals are no substitute for sincerity or morality.

Very well, then. Let us assume that have sincere hearts, and we are prepared to do our best to live morally. Are we now in a position in which Micah 6:8 can be a clear guide for us?

Well, yes and no. Sort of.

For, if we are really serious about living God's way, then we will consider Micah's words carefully, and, when we do that, we will discover that within these noble words about justice, kindness, and humility are complexities and even controversies.

Justice

For example, what is justice? In economic matters, at least, two versions of justice are available today. Justice A says that you get to keep whatever you have earned, or created, or invented, or discovered, or worked for. Justice B says that everyone in our wealthy nation will have adequate food and medical care, decent housing, an education, and opportunities for work. Both of these understandings of justice make strong claims upon us.

Surely it is only right that we get to keep what we've made.

And surely it's only right that in our country, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, no one go without food or clothing or housing and so on.

We could call these two Republican justice and Democratic justice.

Surely both of them are right, and just.

The problem is that these two understandings of justice are incompatible. The only way to insure that everyone in this country has enough to eat, is to take away from the wealthy some of what they have and to give it to those who do not have enough. If you do this, you violate Justice A, and if you don't, you violate Justice B.

Those of us who want to live sincerely and morally must wrestle with this fact. We must live with a continuing tension between these two understandings of justice. In my judgment, we cannot give up on either one entirely. If we take seriously the message of Israel's prophets we cannot deny that we bear responsibility for the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the stranger within our gates.

Or, as we might say today, we bear responsibility for the unemployed, the AIDS patient, the cancer patient, the crack baby, the widow, and the illegal immigrant.

That is part of what it means to do justice. But it is not all.

Those who take the eighth commandment—thou shalt not steal—seriously cannot casually authorize government to take away from people the wealth they have earned or created or discovered.

So, justice in economic matters is controversial and difficult.

But justice is not only about economics. Justice also is about how we treat one another. There can be justice, and injustice, in the relationships between any two people.

I have come to believe that a large proportion of the anger and rage that many people have is caused by their feeling that they have been treated unjustly. It begins in childhood. We seem to be born with an inner alarm that goes off when someone treats us in a way we feel is unfair.

Injustice occurs wherever people fail to keep their promises. In the language of Scripture, injustice is unfaithfulness to the covenants we make. Many of our covenants are informal and unspoken, of course. Some, such as marriage, are formal, but most are not.

When we do not keep our promises, it is only rarely because we wish to inflict pain on someone; our goal is almost never to act as unjustly as possible. What leads us not to keep our promises is our desire to be comfortable and happy ourselves.

There are more complexities here than I can address this morning, of course, and I confess that I cannot sort them all out. But I believe very deeply that we all need to be reminded of the message of Micah. There is no substitute for having a sincere heart. And there is no substitute for living morally. And even though it is difficult to know what justice is in some circumstances, we are responsible to think about it and to talk about it and to pray about it in ways that guide our conduct toward justice. Church is, among other things, a community of moral discourse, a place where it is safe for us to explore together how to be a just person in our world today. I hope it is that for us all this morning.

I think it is terribly important for us not to surrender the quest for justice. For the Lord requires justice of the people who are in a covenant relationship with God.

Kindness

When we turn from justice to kindness, the question that we must ask is this: How do we know when to do justice and when to show kindness?

Teachers find this perplexing when it is time to give grades: Do I act justly and give a student who really tried the poor grade she earned, or do I act kindly and give her an B for effort?

Managers find it perplexing: Do I act justly and give the promotion to the newcomer whom nobody likes but who is terrific at her job, or do I act kindly and give the promotion to the old-timer whom everyone loves and who is at least competent at his job? There is no simple solution to questions like these.

Christians are guided in this matter by the principle that what is at stake is the welfare of the person with whom we are dealing. We make our decision about when to do justice and when to show kindness by taking into consideration the welfare of the person.

Here we must be careful. By “welfare” we do not mean only what will make the person happy or comfortable. We mean also what will make the person the best person that he or she can be. It isn’t always easy to know what that is. Often what helps a person to become a better person isn’t what makes that person comfortable or even happy; sometimes it is.

What makes me think that in morality the issue is the welfare of people? It is Jesus’ teaching. In Mark 2, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. We could call this the humane principle. Rules are not designed by God to squelch the lives and the enjoyment of their lives of human beings. They are designed for the well-being, the flourishing, of people.

What Jesus said about the Sabbath is true about the other commandments as well. God does not create people in order to have someone to keep commandments. Rather, God gives commandments in order to help people know how to live in ways that make for their well-being and flourishing.

In summary, God’s laws are expressions of God’s kindness, and God expects us to understand them as guidelines to a life of kindness ourselves.

Humility

I have spoken of justice and kindness, and that brings us to our final virtue, humility.

In the ancient world generally, humility was considered a vice rather than a virtue. Apparently it was only Jews and Christians who thought of it as a virtue.

Things haven't changed much since then. Some people with an interest in virtues ignore humility. For example, William Bennett did not mention humility in *The Book of Virtues*.

Other people do not ignore humility; they despise it. They think of a humble person as an ineffectual and defeated person, a loser. They understand humility to be a feeling of self-contempt.

All of this is wrong. Humility is not contempt for yourself. Humility is respect for others as well as for yourself. It is recognizing that your own life is not the only one that matters. It is accepting that the lives of others matter, also.

Humility is also respect for God. It is letting God be God. It is having no other God but the Lord. It is not allowing anything else to become your god—not your family or your nation, not your comfort or your wealth, not your intelligence or your emotions or your experiences.

So the biblical vision of humility is entirely different from the world's vision. The biblical vision is that humility is an appropriate respect for God and for other persons.

Conclusion

Justice, kindness, humility. These are three virtues that the Lord requires of us. They are habits of the heart, firm dispositions that help to curb our passions and to guide our actions.

It turns out that Micah 6:8 offers us quite a challenge, doesn't it? It is not a platitude about a goal that can be adopted by all people of good will and quickly and easily reached. Rather it is a serious challenge for God's covenant people, to be thought about, talked about, prayed about, and worked on throughout our lives.

We probably learn about justice and kindness and humility a little at a time, mostly by being in a community that values them and discusses them and displays them. The church is such a community.

It is better if that community has a book which clearly teaches these things. The Bible does that.

It is better still if the community has the Spirit of God to help its members to become people of justice, kindness, and humility. The Spirit is with us.

And it is the best of all if the founder of that community has given a promise, as Jesus did: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

My Christian friends, let those of us who have become members of the covenant community of God through the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, let us hunger and thirst to become just, kind, and humble people. Let us pray for it, think about it, seek it, talk about it, and discipline ourselves for it. Let us ask the Lord to help us. For what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?