

“Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly”

Micah 6:1-8

“Listen to what the LORD says,” said the prophet Micah to the people of Jerusalem (6:1). He was from the rural village of Moresheth in the land of Judah, and his book begins with prophecies of doom directed toward Israel and Judah. Because the leaders of the people “despise justice and distort all that is right,” Micah said that “Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble” (3:9, 12).

What was going on in Jerusalem? Jerusalem’s “leaders judge for a bribe,” says the prophet, “her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money” (3:11). Micah saw that people in power were trying to get ahead — in business, government and religion — and they were using corrupt and unjust practices.

In particular, rich landowners were exploiting vulnerable people in the community. “They covet fields and seize them,” said Micah. “They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance” (2:2). In Jerusalem, the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. And this was happening on a playing field that was anything but level.

But Micah was not interested only in exposing injustice. He predicted that a shepherd-king would arise to rule Judah. This new ruler would come from the little town of Bethlehem; he would be a rural savior who was not part of the wealthy Jerusalem establishment.

Then, the prophet accused the people of not being satisfied with God’s goodness to them. “Listen to what the LORD says,” said Micah. “I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery” (6:1, 4).

“I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (v. 4).

“Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,” crossing the Jordan River into the promised land (v. 5).

God brought the people out of slavery, gave them wise and powerful leaders, and brought them into the promised land. No matter what they achieve or attain, they want more. Instead of enjoying the good life that God has given them, they resort to corruption and injustice to satisfy their wishes and expectations.

“The LORD has a case against his people,” said Micah; “he is lodging a charge against Israel” (v. 2).

These were hard words for the people to hear, and some of them immediately felt guilty. They asked the prophet what they could do to make things better. “With what shall I come before the LORD,” they asked, “and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” (v. 6). *No, said the prophet, forget about your burnt offerings.*

“Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?” (v. 7). *No, said the prophet, God will not be pleased with rams and oil.*

“Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,” said the people, “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (v. 7). *Are you kidding? Human sacrifice? No way, said the prophet.*

Micah reveals the true secret to happiness: It has nothing to do with money or power or real estate holdings. The prophet says that God “has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (v. 8).

Act justly. This is not wishful thinking about the administration of justice in the world, but a set of concrete actions that advances fairness and equality for all of God's people. In particular, to act justly means to work on behalf of people who are weak or powerless or exploited by others. Acting justly is the opposite of what the rich landowners of Jerusalem were doing as they exploited vulnerable people in the community.

Love mercy. The Hebrew of this commandment is a little bit tricky because the word translated "mercy" is *hesed*, which is a common word in the Bible, but not one that can be translated neatly into any one English word. Yes, it means mercy, but it also means kindness, grace, loyalty and faithfulness. To love *hesed* is to love all these qualities, which are so important in a relationship with God and with the people around us. This is similar to what Jesus said to the Pharisees when they questioned why he was eating with tax collectors and sinners: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13).

Walk humbly with God. Once again, the challenge is concrete action: "Walk humbly." This means to travel forward with God, walking in God's way and staying close to God. It means to remain humble as we make this journey, because God is all-powerful and cannot be manipulated by burnt offerings or rivers of oil. When we travel in this way, we are mindful of our behavior, because we know that God is challenging us to act justly and to love mercy.

The promise of this verse is the gift of satisfaction. When we act justly, we tend to have good relationships with the people around us. When we love mercy, we can feel as though we are in step with Almighty God. True satisfaction does not come from property or power or money.

Instead, it comes from being right with God, and right with the people around us, through using our time and talents to follow Jesus' example of servanthood and to be the body of Christ today and always. Let's look at our time and talents sheets, fill them out if you haven't already and bring them forward during the offering.

May the peace of God . . .

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