

Walking the Walk

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Micah 6:1-8

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury... I feel like I should begin with these or similar words because the prophet, Micah, has placed us into a courtroom setting, with God as the prosecuting attorney. (I realize it can be dangerous to use the words, God and attorney, in the same sentence!) The defendant in this case is all of God's people. The jury consists of the mountains and the hills – God's creation will decide the outcome. You might say that God is filing a lawsuit against those who have broken their covenant with God, who have turned away from God, who have rebelled against God. And since the mountains and hills have been around a long time, have witnessed all the evils of which humans are capable, have seen covenants made and covenants broken, they are well qualified to sit in judgment.

The prosecutor speaks first. And God initially sounds hurt, surprised, confused: "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? What have I done to cause you to treat me like this, to disobey me, to ignore me to break my heart?" Then God begins to make his case, listing what he has done to save and preserve and care for them: deliverance from slavery in Egypt, turning a curse from Balaam into a word of blessing – a story told in Numbers 22-24; bringing them from Shittim to Gilgal – a reference to the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. If the people will just pause and remember, they will realize that God has been faithful, present with them in every age and every circumstance, has kept the covenant. But they have not remembered. They have been selfish. They have forgotten God's generosity. They have not fashioned the kind of just and caring community envisioned by the God who liberated them from political and economic bondage.

God sits down and it is time for the accused, God's people, to respond. And basically their response is a question... God, what do you want us to do? What will it take to please you and make things right? Shall we increase our pledge – always a tempting offer – ten thousand barrels of oil, thousands of rams? Basically the people's response to God's accusation is to offer an ever-escalating list of potential and ever greater offerings – from burnt offerings to rivers of oil to our firstborn. Human sacrifice, by the way, was forbidden in ancient Israel, so this reference is more hyperbole and exaggeration than actual – an illustration of the people searching for some method, some form, of excess offering with which to please God. The correct offering, the correct ritual, the correct ceremony, the correct words will surely please God. This is what God wants from us...right?

A Fred Craddock story: There once was an old man whose only close friend was his dog. The love between them had deepened through the years. Now both had begun to feel the pain and burden of age. The dog, twelve years old, could hardly walk and was covered with an irritating rash. The old man lifted the dog into his arms and carried it to the car where it lay on the seat beside him on the way to see the veterinarian. From the parking lot the man carried the dog gently inside. "Can I help you?" asked the vet?

The man, still holding his dog, said, "First, I must ask you a question. Do you love animals above everything else?"

The vet replied, "Well, I love God first. Jesus says in Mark 12:30, 'You shall love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind and strength.' And of course, a second command is to love your neighbor as yourself.' We must put these things first, and then we can think about the animals."

"Then I must go elsewhere," said the old man.

"Why? What is wrong?"

"This dog is my friend," explained the man, "and I feel I can trust him only to the care of a veterinarian who is a Christian."

The vet had all the right words, sounded great, but the old man felt no compassion from him, no understanding of his love for his dog. He needed so much more from the doctor than just high sounding words. "You can quote scripture, but will you care about my dog?"

And so it is that God needs more, wants more, from God's people. They discover that God is far more interested in the way they live their everyday lives than in their religious practices. The words, the prayers, the rituals mean nothing if they are not accompanied by faithful lives. .

So what is that that God wants? First... "Do justice." It is not enough to wish for justice or talk about justice. No, do justice, in Hebrew – *mispat*. It means to work for fairness and equality for all, particularly the weak and the powerless who are exploited by others. Justice as used by Micah is a transformative virtue that seeks to establish or restore community, while aiming to balance personal good with the common good. The God of justice wants God's people to be particularly concerned about the fate of the poor and weak and oppressed. It is an obligation that cannot be ignored in the name of not helping the lazy and undeserving – which is something we hear a lot today, especially in state legislatures and Congress. Justice is not about an unfettered market economy. It is about saving individuals, reaching out, caring for the least of these within the web of community.

Task number two... Love kindness. Kindness, *hesed*, in Hebrew, has to do with love, loyalty and faithfulness. This is far more than simply being nice. It involves both affection and ethical love of neighbor, and is the key element in relationships, whether in marriage or between friends or between God and humanity. No resentment, no coercion, no manipulation – rather a relationship of faithfulness motivated by love – even putting the welfare of another above my own needs. It is extending to others the same selfless love God extends to us.

Finally, "walk humbly" which might be better understood as to walk carefully or circumspectly. The key word here is "walk" – we are to walk with God, careful to put God first and live according to God's will for our lives. This phrase implies an attitude of reverence and openness, walking through life aware that God is our constant companion. It is in this walk with God that we live out God's call to justice and kindness, participants in, contributors to, what God is doing in the world.

The story is told that at the height of the Civil War's horrific battle of Shiloh, Abraham Lincoln was in the War Department in Washington when he encountered the brother and sister-in-law of General Lew Wallace, who himself was in the thick of the battle. His sister-in-law exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. President, we'd heard that a General Wallace was among the killed, and we were afraid it was *our* Wallace. But it wasn't." "Ah," Lincoln replied, looking down into her face with saddened eyes, "but it was *somebody's* Wallace."

This is the awareness, the caring, the compassion, that Micah is talking about – understanding, appreciating that everyone is somebody's Wallace, everyone is precious, everyone is included in our pursuit of the common good.

"Do justice... love kindness... walk humbly." What happens in these few words is that God's work is abruptly assigned to us as human work. God explodes into our midst and we get pushed out beyond our conventional and comfortable horizons... pushed into God's work of promise and liberation... pushed into constructing economic policies that recognize and include and benefit all God's children. We just cannot allow fear or anger or the desire for our own personal security to erode our capacity for compassion.

Pope Francis sounded a lot like Micah when he declared, not long before Christmas, "The worship of the golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose... the imbalance between the rich and the poor is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Whatever is fragile, the environment, the poor, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market." Of course, Rush Limbaugh called the Pope's comments, "pure Marxism." But they sounded an awful lot like the prophet to me... or even Jesus of Nazareth.

When we live according to our fears and our hates, our lives become small and defensive, lacking the deep, joyous generosity of God. But if we dare to embrace the God we meet in Micah, we embrace and encounter a God who invites us to a life that is so much larger, who leads us well beyond our little categories of control and our fearfully guarded notions of what is possible; a God who leads us to give and forgive, who says to us, you know differently and you have the freedom to act differently. Now go out and do it!