

“Required and Blessed”
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

God has a bone to pick with God’s people.

Speaking through the Prophet Micah to the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C., God declares a complaint against the people. The scene is a courtroom. And God has “a controversy;” God has a lawsuit against Israel. And God begins the questioning as the prosecuting attorney. “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!”

(No answer yet.)

God continues. “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and I redeemed you from slavery.”

(Don’t you remember?)

“I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as leaders.”

(Have you forgotten?)

“O my people, remember now how King Balak of Moab had all of his diabolical plans for your destruction, but I saved you. And I saved

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you over and over as you travelled through the wilderness. You see, I've been faithful to you even when you have been unfaithful to me."

(Don't you recall?)

God's case against Israel is utterly clear. The evidence, overwhelming. The guilt, unmistakable.

And then at last comes Israel's response, phrased as the answer of an individual person.

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" Basically, the question is: "What do I need to give in order to be ready to come to God in worship?"

Israel tries several possibilities, each escalating in costliness.

"How about if I bow down before God on high? Will that do it?"

"What about bringing God burnt offerings? Is that it?"

"Will it make God happy if I bring thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil? Are we getting somewhere now?"

"Or shall I give my firstborn as payment for my sins, my own child as payment for the sin of my soul?"

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And notice that God ignores all of these possibilities. Why?

Because God has something much better in mind.

God speaks through the prophet again. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good.” In other words, this is not new instruction. You’ve heard this before. Three things. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

So simple, yet so complex. So easy, yet so challenging. Look at each of the concepts, one by one.

Justice. The word appears hundreds of times in scripture. It means doing what is right. It means fairness, and, of course, fairness includes truthfulness.

Unfortunately, as Micah points out repeatedly, Israel has often failed to do justice. As one Bible scholar says, “The powerful oppress the powerless (2:1-2, 8-9; 3:1-3, 9-10), laborers are exploited (3:10), courts are corrupt (3:11). To do justice means to work for the establishment of equity for all, especially for the powerless.” (James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, Interpretation Series, 192.) But Israel’s many failures to practice justice have made God angry. So God has filed a lawsuit.

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Of course, Israel is not alone in her failures. Despite all of its generosity and freedoms, our own country has its failures to practice justice.

The powerful go into court, repeatedly lie, and act as though they are above the law, and get away with it, at least for a time.

The gap between our wealthiest citizens and our poorest has become a chasm of injustice. Millions of our people work very hard, sometimes working more than one job, but wages are too low for them to pay for decent housing and necessities.

We also know that racism, sexism, ageism, as well as prejudice against our LGBTQ brothers and sisters continues, even though we are called to do justice.

God has filed a lawsuit against Israel. Has God filed a lawsuit against our country too?

God also requires that we “love kindness.” As an Old Testament professor puts it, “‘To love kindness’ (or ‘mercy,’ ‘steadfast love,’ *hesed*) is to be faithful in covenant relationships, to maintain solidarity

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with others, including those in need or trouble.” (Gene M. Tucker in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, 141.)

So, again, as U.S. Christians we think about our covenant relationships, such as marriage or partnership, church, country. How are we doing keeping our promises to God and each other? And when it comes to persons “in need or trouble” how might we improve?

For example, think about refugees and migrants at the U.S. southern border. I doubt any of us would favor open borders. But most of us are opposed to cramming often desperate people together in dirty facilities, without appropriate medical care. Making men, women, and children sleep on cold concrete floors without blankets, separating children from parents, and so on.

But let’s not get caught in the false dichotomy of having only the choice between open borders on one side or armed fortress on the other. There are actually possibilities in the middle much more nuanced.

The solutions to our immigration crisis are not simple, but they are pressing upon us as Christians. And our calling, our *requirement* (to use the prophet’s language), is to do justice and love kindness and to

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continue to tell our elected representatives to sit down and figure out a more humane system.

Now maybe you're saying, "There goes the preacher talking about politics again." And you're right. But here's the thing, the gospel *is* political, not political in the sense of saying one party always gets it right and another always gets it wrong but political in the sense that God does expect us "to do justice, and to love kindness," and to try to shape public policy to be as fair and kind as possible. So, we read up and speak up on public policy in many areas, because not to speak *is* to speak by our very silence.

Finally, what does the Lord require but "to walk humbly with your God?" The Hebrew verb means to be modest, not arrogant. One Old Testament scholar says, "...True piety [true faithfulness] is not a private affair, like a pleasant stroll on the beach with God at one's side. What God requires is a life of engagement with others in the quest for justice and mercy in a world that clamors for hatred with vengeance. A humble walk with God is demonstrated in a life of continual reexamination and self-questioning of one's motives and purposes in life in service to

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God.” (William P. Brown, *Obadiah Through Malachi*, Westminster Bible Companion Series, 59-60.)

What does the Lord require of you and me? “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is what God expects from us. This is what God requires from us.

It sounds like work, doesn't it? It sounds like a challenge, doesn't it?

But David Bartlett, my favorite preaching professor, always used to remind us that preaching is many things but above all it is good news, not just obligations, “shoulds” and “oughts” and “musts” but good news.

So, what is the good news here? Isn't it that as we do our best to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, we serve as God's instruments in making a blessed world, a world filled with hope not fear, joy not hatred, generosity not greed, truth not lies and cover-ups? And isn't it true that in our Spirit-filled attempts, we ourselves are made blessed, just as Jesus talked about those who are blessed?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prayed, “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be

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on your right or your best side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition, but I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so we can make of this old world a new world.”

What does the Lord require of you? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. And, said Jesus, blessed are you. Amen.

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