

February 2, 2020

Micah 6:8

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of God, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Holy One has a controversy with the people, and will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 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 God.”

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before the Holy One with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will God 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?” God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

In the stories told in Hebrew Scriptures, in the histories and in the prophets, the seasonal story of our relationship with God is revealed: We find ourselves in trouble. We cry to God for help. Help, which doesn't always seem like help at first, comes. We are safe, and relieved. Our relief is short lived, as we get fat and happy. So, we begin to think we are in charge and ignore the burdensome requirements of God – like caring for the least among us, freeing the oppressed. This opens the door for trouble, which always comes. We find ourselves in trouble, which starts the circular seasonal story all over again.

This is what is happening in this famous passage from Micah. God calls for a trial, because the people God has freed from Egypt – or Babylon or from any of the other myriad neighboring fiefdoms – the people have once again ignored God's rules for living the “good” life. As Micah's trial develops, the people see the error of their ways and ask: what are we supposed to do?

Micah's answer is one of the most known and memorized Bible verses in history: **to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.**

This is what you are supposed to do. Micah has been paired up with another equally famous Bible passage: The opening of the Sermon on

the Mount, the Beatitudes. I put the passage in the bulletin so you could follow along. I will speak to each verse and how it relates to Micah's three requirements: justice, kindness, humility.

Matthew 5:1-12, *The Message Bible*

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

“You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.”

No matter how hard I try, it is always about me. Remember? Pride is that virtue that once achieved makes one proud and you have to start over again. “At the end of your rope” means you are in trouble and you are ready to move beyond the first season, beyond yourself, and call out to God for help. Yes, less of you and more of God.

“You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

This is the one we know traditionally as “blessed are those who mourn.” The loss of a loved one is another time of trouble that has us calling out to God. It was in that time of my troubles that I came to understand how blessed I was to have shared so much love that the loss of a loved one pained me. It is a blessing for having had the love in the first place and then knowing, over time, that I was still being held in that love, still embraced, albeit in a new way. This is the power of loving kindness.

“You're blessed when you're content with just who you are - no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.”

Walking humbly through life is the same as walking humbly with God, when we accept that God is life. Walking in true humility is not the same as walking feeling unworthy or ashamed (no one should walk that way). Walking humbly with God is knowing that you are loved and lovable, while also knowing all whom you encounter are also loved and lovable, worthy of respect. Such walking is the foundation for justice. To walk in this way requires, I believe, a true acceptance of oneself, content with just how you are, which makes you a “proud owner of everything that cannot be bought.” Contentment is a wonderful thing.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.”

This is a meal we are going to share in just a few moments. It is the meal God invites all creation to; a meal that says there is enough for all. And our willingness to invite all to the table with the desire on our part that all creation has enough, to be God’s agents in feeding the hungry, is how we do justice. And when such justice is done, the food and drink become the best meal we will ever eat. Even if it is a McDonald’s hamburger, because it allowed the person eating it to sit in a warm room, to use the restroom, to wash themselves. Ah, what a meal!

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.”

I have never shared love and found myself emptied. I have been loved, I have been given care by people I have loved and given care to. Their love, their care has been exponentially greater than anything I had ever given. St. Francis’ prayer is right: It is in giving that we receive. “To love kindness” is its own reward.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world - your mind and heart - put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

This is also about walking humbly with God. When we get our heart in the right place, we are able to see God, who is love, everywhere, even in those we dislike. A life-changing revelation for me was when I decide to accept my faith as true and not let someone who disagreed with my theology control my feelings. Looking back, what I did was put my mind and my heart right with God and it changed, transformed me and my relationships with those who think differently from me. My love grew, even though my disagreements remained. I cannot tell you how freeing this has been for me.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

This is the beatitude we know as “Blessed are the peacemakers.” To attain this blessing requires us to follow all three of God’s requirements: justice, kindness, and humility. When try to be peacemakers, we discover not only who we are, but who those on the other side are, as well as their and our “place in God’s family.” It changes the question of “who we are” to “whose we are”.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s reign.”

By the time you get to this beatitude your faith is kind of set, hopefully strong. But, there is nothing like being pecked at, hollered at, put down to make you examine yourself even harder, trying to figure out what it is you really believe, and this often leads to questioning your faith. This is a good thing. I have found that it is the examining and questioning of one’s faith that one’s faith is strengthened.

“Not only that – count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens – give a cheer, even! – for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

Practically speaking, walking humbly with God makes people nervous. They see you speaking with people on the other side of the divide and think you are betraying their cause. Or, people think you are weak and ineffectual. Walking humbly with God puts you in the category of sweater-jacket-wearing Fred Rogers, who many view as a wimp, in all its negative emphasis. Because of this people will see you as a pushover, someone to be bullied.

Little do they know of the blessing of contentment and love and peacemaking. Little do they know of the power caring for the people, despite the hate. Humility, walking humbly with God is not weak or ineffective. It is just the opposite. It is stronger than steel, because our humble walk comes with the power of justice and loving kindness.

What I have just shared with you is the foundation on which my faith, and, I hope, my life is built. It is what motivates me to spend a night, once a year, outdoors. I need to experience “what the least of these” is forced to live with. I need to do this, because it moves homelessness from my head to my heart, deepening my resolve to allow God to work through me with the goal to feed and house and heal all who are in need. I pray you too will follow God’s requirements to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Holy One. Amen.