



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Improving One's Aim

Micah 6:1-8 & Matthew 6:1-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

2 February 2020

¹⁻²When 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: ³"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. ⁴"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. ⁵"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. ⁶"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. ⁷"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for. ⁸"You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. ⁹"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. ¹⁰"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. ¹¹⁻¹²"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. (Mt. 5:1-12 *The Message*)

I would not be surprised if the Beatitudes we just read were influenced by Micah's prophecy. We don't know a lot about the prophet Micah. He numbers sixth among the twelve minor prophets. Scholars tend to locate Micah in the years around 730 BC - several years before Assyrian armies destroyed Samaria and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The southern kingdom avoided a similar fate...but only at the price of its subservience to Assyria - i.e., huge tributes, loss of complete independence, and corruption of its traditions by the incorporation of Assyrian religious practices. In this time of great change, Micah stepped forward to provide a theological interpretation of crucial events facing the nation and its people.

Central to Micah's theology was his compassion for the poor and dispossessed of Israel - who, because of the shady deals and shifty scheming on the part of the wealthy and powerful in Israel, were made to suffer all the more.¹

With this background, we turn now to the passage for our consideration this morning. When we begin reading, you will find we are in the midst of a court proceeding. Not all is right between the Hebrew people and their God. The court must decide who has failed - i.e., God or the religious leaders, the wealthy, and the powerful within Israel.

God takes the stand first and briefly recounts how he has faithfully loved his people through the years. The mountains and hills are called to serve as the jury. How many

times have we said something like, "I wish these hills could talk." Once God has had his say, a lone voice speaks for the wealthy and powerful of Israel.

Listen to God's word spoken through his prophet Micah to the people of Israel... and where appropriate, to us. I'm reading Eugene Peterson's translation of the text. Sometimes his translation helps us hear the message in a fresh way.

¹⁻² Listen now, listen to God: "Take your stand in court. If you have a complaint, tell the mountains; make your case to the hills. And now, Mountains, hear God's case; listen, Jury Earth— For I am bringing charges against my people. I am building a case against Israel. ³⁻⁵ "Dear people, how have I done you wrong? Have I burdened you, worn you out? Answer! I delivered you from a bad life in Egypt; I paid a good price to get you out of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you— and Aaron and Miriam to boot! Remember what Balak king of Moab tried to pull, and how Balaam son of Beor turned the tables on him. Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal. Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present." ⁶⁻⁷ How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God? Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin? ⁸ But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously— take God seriously. (Mic. 6:1-8 *The Message*)

1

The prophet leaves no doubt the fault for the rift between God and Israel does not point to God. God has been faithful. God has tenderly, patiently, graciously watched after Israel.

Then a lone voice speaks from the witness stand for Israel. "Well then...with what shall I come before the Lord?" he asks. The spokesman offers no self-defense. He seems to recognize the fault lies with Israel. "What do you want God? Do you want burnt offerings, calves, rams...maybe rivers of oil...how about my eldest child?"

We could join the lone witness and ask, "With what shall we come before you Lord? With our tithes and offerings? Our pledges of time and talent? Two years of service in the Peace Corps or the Young Adult Volunteers (YAV) program of the Presbyterian Church (USA)? A perfect church attendance record?"

In accordance with the sacrificial system of Micah's day, it was not out of line to think of offering the Lord burnt offerings, calves, rams, rivers of oil, or even one's first born son. These were precious, costly treasures. To offer them to God was to offer the very best in hopes God would be pleased.

But, these offerings were a bit like the conversation between a pig and a chicken. When asked by their master to make a contribution to his breakfast, the pig says to the chicken, "You're only being asked to make a donation. For me it is a total commitment."

I'm reminded of the hymn, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, by Christina Rossetti. In the last verse we sing about what we have to bring to the Christ child. A shepherd can bring a lamb. A wise man can bring gifts. But the greatest gift we can give is our heart.

Therein lay the weakness of Israel's sacrificial system. When completely misunderstood, it made it awfully easy to give God things and avoid giving God one's heart. We justify giving less than our whole self, too, don't we?

Micah made it very clear God was not the one who needed to be changed. The people needed a change of heart and mind. Proverbs 21:3 reads - "...the Lord weighs the human heart. Clean living before God and doing justice with one's neighbor mean far more to God than religious rituals."² God did not want from Israel any of Israel's "stuff." What God wanted, what God required from his people, was nothing less than the refocus of their lives - for everyone from the king to the lowliest person to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with him.³

2

On one level I find it striking and really sad to read these words from Micah and the Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel account in light of what is taking place in our country. The sad reality is that we haven't learned a thing. The parallels are so obvious that you have to work very hard to avoid seeing them...and yet it seems so many people have done just that!

On another level, though, I am hopeful that hearing these words provides us an opportunity to do what Micah and Jesus wanted the people in their day to do when they heard these words...that is, repent and take actual steps to amend our ways.

To a people who were much like us...going through the motions of practicing their faith but in their hearts had either become as faithless and corrupt as their leaders or was it that they got the corrupt leaders they deserved...God says: "Why are you doing this? Why are you being this way? Over and over and over again I have made it crystal clear what I want for you and from you people? I want you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with me, your God."

In one of her books, writer Madeleine L'Engle tells the following story about an Hassidic rabbi. The rabbi was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciples, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?" The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stuttered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions." "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant," rejoined the rabbi, "for if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"⁴

I think the rabbi's words give us a window into what Micah tells us about God and Israel and about ourselves. Through Micah we hear God saying, "You think your burnt offerings and your prayers are more important to me than they really are. What hurts me is that you do not seem to realize what I really want is for you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with me, your God. Unless you can do these things, how can you truly love me?"

3

Let's take a few moments to think about these three attitudes God wants for us.

First, the people were **to do justice**. This called upon everyone - but especially upon the people in power - to deal fairly with one another. But more particularly, it called

upon them to deal fairly and equitably with those people who were the easiest targets for exploitation - the poor, the weak, the down-trodden, the powerless.

Shocking, isn't it, how effortlessly people in positions of power choose to exploit the easiest targets. As songwriter Pete Seeger once asked, "When will they ever learn...when will they ever learn."⁵ Of course, it is not just a matter of when will "they" learn. The question is, when will "we" learn?

What does the Lord require? Justice...honest, active justice.

4

The second thing Micah said the people were to do was to **love kindness**...to treat one another kindly. Our word "kindness" really falls short of the Hebrew word *hesed* (חסד). The Hebrew word entails something much deeper - something more like what we think of when we talk about "loving kindness" or "mercy."⁶ In the Old Testament the term *hesed* is generally used to talk about a relationship where one person is in significant need of help from another person...and the help needed generally goes well beyond the usual expectations of that relationship.⁷

Something I read a few years ago put it this way: Loving kindness requires that we **put a face on it**. What that means to me is that we cannot know we have truly loved, or be sure others know we love them, without putting a face on love by our kind hand's-on behavior. We may think we are putting love at the center of our spiritual lives. We might be the most pious people you ever saw...reading, preaching, talking about how important this or that noble thing is. But invisible love is no love at all.⁸ Too often we substitute perfunctory kindness for a genuine, loving engagement with others?⁹

What does the Lord require of us? Loving kindness...hand's-on, sacrificial, forgiving, self-forgetting, attentive kindness.

5

The third thing the prophet Micah said the people were to do was **to walk humbly with their God**. They were to "walk" with God, careful each step to be mindful of God.

I hear Micah talking about a rubber-hits-the-road sort of attitude. Not just the sort of attitude they might have when life was going well. But a determination to cling to God as the bedrock of their lives...to ground themselves in God as their only sure foothold. And no matter what precipice lay beneath them, no matter what hardship or danger they faced, they were to trust their security was found only in God.¹⁰

From Matthew's Gospel we read what is known as the Beatitudes. By way of the beatitudes Christ seemed to say walking humbly with God involves meekness, purity of heart, and poverty of spirit.

6

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God are the impulses of a righteous person. The energies of a righteous person are directed toward God and toward others. Righteousness is **relational**.

Micah understood that in every possible relationship, a righteous human being lives as God wants - or at least works at living as God wants. The aim is important. The aim is to walk in relationship with God and to let that primary relationship shape the relationships we have with our fellow two-legged walkers...and with all of creation.

4

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells us:

*One of the Hebrew words for a righteous person suggests "one whose aim is true." If we set this word beside the Greek word that defines sin as "missing the mark," this gives us a picture of **righteousness as target practice**. Whether my arrow finds its mark or falls a hundred feet away, the daily practice of right relationship is how I improve my aim. I will continue to sin, no doubt about it – but that is not my aim. My true aim is to live as God wants me to live and the desire to please God does in fact please God.¹¹*

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. May the Spirit of God help us all to want to improve our aim. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ See Isaiah 5:8-10 and 10:1-2.

² Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1135 – citing Proverbs 21:3.

³ Brueggemann, Walter. et. al. 1995. Texts for Preaching: Year A. Louisville: WJK Press, 120.

⁴ L'Engle, Madeleine. 1995 ed. Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith. NY: North Point Press, 70-71.

⁵ From "Where have all the flowers gone." 1955.

⁶ Brueggemann, 120.

⁷ Sakenfeld, Catharine D. ed. 2008. I-Ma. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 495-496.

⁸ Monks of New Skete. 1999. In the Spirit of Happiness. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 251.

⁹ Simmons, Philip. 2002. Learning to Fall: The Blessings of An Imperfect Life. NY: Bantam Books, 96.

¹⁰ Groome, Thomas H. et. al. 1986. To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: An Agenda for Ministers. NY: Paulist Press, 50.

¹¹ Taylor, Barbara B. 2000. Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation. Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 101.