

## WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
February 2, 2020**

Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:1-8

Today is the day we commission and install the new officers and members of the Mission Review Committee whom you elected at the congregational meeting last Sunday. Yesterday, we met for a retreat at the Rockefeller Archives to discuss our agenda and plans for the year ahead. Ultimately, of course, it's God's plans for Union Church that matter—not mine nor the leadership's nor yours. The important thing is not for us to know exactly where we're going, but to trust God to lead us in God's grace and power. For before the church is a voluntary organization, we are a community constituted by the call and commission of the God we know in Jesus Christ. Only by God's Spirit will we be able to fulfill the mandate Jesus has given us to preach and heal in his name. I am persuaded, as I trust you are, that God's Spirit *is* among us.

But what does God want us to *do*? What does the Lord require of us?

My former colleague at First Presbyterian Church in New York, Jon Walton, once observed that we make our faith a lot more difficult than it really is. We over-analyze, use too much head and not enough heart. "Take the simplicity of the Ten Commandments," Jon says, "which became in the hands of the lawgivers of Israel, 613 laws enumerated in the Torah. Take the original *Book of Order*, the constitution of the old Presbyterian Church in this nation. It consisted of ten pages. Today, we can barely get all the laws of the church—its creeds, and forms, and appendices—on fewer than 930 pages! We make our faith a lot more difficult than it is!"<sup>1</sup>

On this Sunday when we install officers, I am thinking about the great polarization of our nation. And the charge that we have as Christians to live our lives in God's service. What word is there today that can draw us together as we charge our leaders and make our own renewed commitments to love and serve God in our lives?

I'm not sure that we can do much better than Micah's gold standard, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" It's simple, it's memorable, and you can put it on a sampler and hang it on the wall. In fact, many scholars have suggested that the weight of the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament is summarized there. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

This saying from Micah chapter 6, verse 8 comes as a response to a dialogue in the first seven verses of the chapter. The language of the dialogue is that of a courtroom. The nation of Israel has been summoned to the witness stand to give account of itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon M. Walton, "What Does the Lord Require?" (Sermon preached at the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, February 3, 2002).

“Plead your case before the mountains,” God says, “let the hills hear your voice.” The creation itself will be the jury.

“What kind of defense will you offer for your sin?” God asks. “How will you bridge the distance you have put between yourself and God?”

God questions and Israel answers, a format similar to the questions and answers asked and given when the faithful in Micah’s day approached the temple to make sacrifice for sin. There, approaching the temple, you would make a confession to the priest who would set the sacrifice prescribed to pay for your transgressions and set things right with God.

So Israel asks, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” (That would be the usual.)

“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” (That would get his attention!)

“Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,” Israel asks, “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Surely that would go too far!)

The sacrifices proposed to atone for Israel’s sin move from the reasonable to the patently absurd. But what’s interesting is that according to Micah God wants none of these sacrifices. What God wants is no *thing* we own at all. What God wants is faithful living. God wants justice, and kindness, and a humble walk in his company.

Anybody who takes that seriously will realize that that alone will be a lifelong enterprise. No one is being let off the hook here. In fact, the stakes have been raised altogether.

“Do justice,” Micah says. Do the just thing. *Mishpat* in Hebrew. Justice. Once again, Micah borrows a term from the courtroom. It means treating everybody the same. Fairness, if you will. It is the blindfold that justice wears when she holds the balance in her hand.

It is to hear the plea of the poor with equity, those folks who cannot get a deal in life based on their good looks, or their charm, or their money, but who end up in court pleading their case because it’s their last resort. They are the widows who are living on welfare and have to go to small claims court to get their plumbing fixed because pleading with the landlord has availed them nothing. They are the folks whose food stamps have run out three days before the end of the month and who have only peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips to feed five children’s mouths. They are the ones for whom justice runs thin.

Do justice, Micah says. Do justly.

And love kindness, as if justice weren’t enough. *Hesed* is the word he uses in Hebrew. And it means faithfulness. It is the way God loves us, even when we are most unlovable, consistently kind, giving us the benefit of the doubt, judging us kindly.

Try to hold them in tandem, kindness and justice. It’s not always easy to do. They get in each other’s way you know.

A minister friend shared with me a knotty personnel issue that came before his church. A former custodian who had served the church for many years died after a long siege. His widow had diabetes and wasn't expected to live long herself. Beset by bills from her late husband's illness and overwhelmed by her own medical costs, she was sinking financially. She remembered that her husband told her that she wouldn't have to worry about money when he was gone, because his pension, paid by the church, would continue benefits for her after his death. But in reality he had opted for a plan that paid all the benefits in his lifetime, not securing any income for his widow.

And the question was, what should the church do? Her need for kindness, versus the option he selected which was his just due paid in full, all legal obligations discharged. If the church were generous and continued all or some of his benefits for the rest of her life, what about all the other employees' spouses in the future who might rightly expect the same generosity? Would the church be obligated to pay them benefits even though the husband opted for a different payout? And doesn't the decision to opt for one plan or the other count for something? What about all those widows and widowers in the past who didn't get anything extra? Is it fair to them to continue this one widow's undeserved benefits?

As we all know, you have to fish or cut bait in life. You have to make choices. After all, the church could end up spending all its assets on its employee's benefits rather than carry out its "real" mission.

You lawyers know about these things better than I do. This is what keeps the courts going. The search for Mishpat, justice, whatever that is, versus the appeal for kindness in a special circumstance.

My minister friend voiced the opinion that this wasn't a pension question at all; and if caring for ill widows at some level is not some part of the church's real business, then what is? Jesus warned about the Pharisees who devoured widow's pensions. And this seemed to skirt perilously close. At its core, he said, this isn't a question about pensions at all. It is a question of compassion, of kindness, if you will. He challenged the people in that church to help to resolve the conundrum, to look for an angel who could be asked to make a special gift to the church—to make the difference for a needy soul who needed some help. It's a not pension question, he said. It's a question of the church being the church and caring for those whom God gives it to care for.

Do justice and love kindness, Micah said, and it's not always easy to do both. But that's what we're call to do, nonetheless. Walking that line, working that out, being fair, and being kind, and knowing that half the time you're going to mess it up in all likelihood, because it's not always clear which is which.

Which is probably why Micah says that the last part of what is required of us is to walk humbly with God. *Halacah* in Hebrew. It is the word that in English is translated, *ethics*. And isn't it interesting that the Hebrew root means simply to walk. As if the journey of life will reveal in its own way the moral and ethical challenges we will have to face, that somehow staying on the journey, walking through life, will reveal to us what choices we must make, what decisions we must face. A decision made at every fork in the road. Sometimes we will mess it up, take a wrong turn, go the wrong way, and

sometimes we will get it right, but we will discover the way only as we go, because the right way is sometimes not known at the outset but revealed as we go.

I suppose it is no mistake that Jesus' invitation to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee was one of journeying, "Come, follow me," he said. And they set out on foot and discovered along the way *who* and *what* he was, and *who* and *what* they were.

One thing I'm sure of: the God we worship is a God whose justice is never divorced from kindness and whose servants must always walk in humility in relationship to that God. If, in the name of God, or in service of God's justice we inflict pain or suffering on others then we can be pretty sure that it is more likely ourselves we are serving than it is God. The cross which stands at the center of our faith is, after all, a symbol that loveless power can deny the power of love, but only for a while. There on that cross evil human beings took into their own hands a misguided justice that was utterly unjust, an injustice so strong that it took God's mighty power to overturn it.

Now the task is for all of us who are trying to serve God as best we can to live out that high standard Micah has laid before us to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Your officers and I are going to try to do that in leading the church. And I hope each one of us will try to live up to that in our work, and in our covenants with those we love—our husband or wife or partner. We will try to do that when we care for our children and our parents. And we'll try to live it out in our responsibilities as people who care about this community and this nation.

We'll hold those in authority over us in public service to that standard as well. And demand no less from them than we demand from ourselves in that regard. We will hope and pray and commit ourselves to working for a society and a world that can be like that, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God.

"Micah says it's all we need to do in life. All that God requires... do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

"Say it with me, *Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God*. Easier said than done. But get on out there and do it, nonetheless.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.