

HUMBLE & KIND

Micah 6:1-8, John 14:15-31

Propped up and stuck to the side of my laptop is hot pink post-it note, it has been there since the start of General Assembly. Those who know me and my love for post-it notes are likely not surprised to hear this.

Scrolled on this post-it are the words “Keep me fiercely kind.” Before every sederunt, I prayed Laura Jean Truman’s prayer and every time I pressed the “Seek Recognition” button on PC-Biz, I offered this 4 word prayer. That post-it remains a constant prayer and reminder.

Through the Spring as I prepared for General Assembly, I read Sarah Bessey’s newest book “A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal.” Sarah Bessey is a Canadian Christian author and this beautiful book is a collection of prayers and meditations from female pastors, writers, and theologians.

In the middle section of this book, a section called “Disorientation” is Laura Jean Truman’s prayer centred on Micah 6:8 can be found.

Micah 6:8 is a passage that those of us who have worked in Christian inner-city missions have had conference, retreats, and staff meetings focused around. We’ve heard just that verse as a stand alone message more often than we can count. There’s a familiarity that can lead to overlooking it, taking it for granted, or avoiding preaching it because it feels obvious or overdone or like maybe there is nothing new to say – or maybe that’s just me.

The prayer focused this verse and named the difficulty in actually living it. The feelings of being tired and angry that comes with trying in earnest to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, in this cruel and complicated world. Praying that has helped this verse have fresh truth for me again.

Micah understood his task to be a preacher of truth to expose injustice and inequity, to offer a word of hope and salvation, and to make known a vision for a new and transformed way of life. He understood what God was requiring of us.

The text of Micah 6:1-8 is commonly regarded as a lawsuit in which Israel and God have come to court to see which one is at fault in this fractured relationship. The prophet acting as an attorney represents God’s case against an ungrateful people.

Natural elements are invoked as witnesses and a historical review that takes Israel back in imagination to its origin story by recalling Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Israel is reminded that in the face of helplessness came the miracle of God's liberating graciousness.

Hebrew Bible theologian Walter Brueggemann writes of the passage: "Education for justice has to do with returning to such a season of origin. None of us, nor all of us together, was born strong. Our birthing as persons and as community was a birthing into weakness, vulnerability and need... our origin is a season of inexplicable gift."

Israel seems not to remember and tries to come at God from a posture of strength. Brueggemann notes: "This is a strange speech of bargaining, in which the worshipper wants to come to the throne of God with the least price available." The value of the bargain or bribe seems to come in ascending order from livestock to finally, the first-born son.

Verses 6 & 7 with the bargaining and calculation stand in such contrast to God's gift of redemption, grace, self-giving, and steadfast love recalled in verses 3-5.

This all leads to the context for the prophet to offer a summary of what is God requires of us.

Brueggemann notes, "Micah 6:8 is commonly recognized as a very peculiar and precious summary of the demands of God mediated through the eighth century prophets... In biblical faith, the doing of justice is the primary expectation of God."

In helping us understand the ways the Bible thinks about justice, Brueggemann offers, "Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them."

I love this definition. In ARISE's case management program we emphasize goal-setting and empowerment. This is part of our value of justice, returning power, control, choice, and agency back to those whom it belongs. Accompaniment and empowerment are part of the work of justice.

This definition resonates because too often we take from each other things that do not belong to us. Sacred things. We tell ourselves that we are being helpful or doing the right thing when we snatch away one another's grief or pain or problems. When we tell someone to cheer up or "that everything happens for a reason" or we should all over them with advice they never asked for. We don't actually listen. None of that is just.

Glennon Doyle writes, “Grief and pain are like joy and peace; they are not things we should try to snatch from each other. They’re sacred. They are part of each person’s journey. All we can do is offer relief from this fear: I am all alone. That’s the one fear you can alleviate.”

Justice requires listening, accompanying, and a sorting out what belongs to whom and returning it to them.

A few years ago, Tim McGraw released a song titled “Humble and Kind.” The chorus says,
“Hold the door, say “please”, say “thank you”
Don’t steal, don’t cheat and don’t lie
I know you got mountains to climb
But always stay humble and kind
When the dreams you’re dreamin’ come to you
When the work you put in is realized
Let yourself feel the pride
But always stay humble and kind”

The song goes through descriptions and actions of being humble and kind. It is a great song, that suggests a way of interacting with others that is certainly humble and kind and that Micah would likely agree with. That said, it is helpful to define what humble and kind mean as used by Micah – what is and what is not humble or kind.

Humble and Kind is not quiet and nice. Too often, we get those words confused or think they are synonymous and they are not. Humble and Kind is also not passive and agreeable or any of the other attributes or ideals of a version of womanhood that seeks to keep women silent and small. That tells us not to question our pay, our seat at the table, to smile and be pretty, to not ruffle feathers, and to laugh off the sexual or sexist comment. None of those things are humble or kind.

None of those things promote justice and truth-telling, two of the very essential concerns of both the prophet and God. What then does Micah mean when telling us that we are required to love kindness and walk humbly.

The Hebrew word for Humble in this passage is “Sana” and it is a verb, an action word. It is not passive, it is about the intentionality of one’s walk with God. It is living cautiously, carefully, and with an intentionality directed towards God.

The Hebrew word for Kind, “Hesed,” the very same word tattooed to my wrist, perhaps renders my hot pink post-it a little redundant. Hesed is my favourite Hebrew word –

translated as kindness, mercy, grace, faithfulness, and steadfast love. It is about relationship and community. When God is the subject of “Hesed” and God’s people are the object, the translation is often steadfast love and a reminder of the abundance of God’s love. When humans are the subject and “Hesed” is about the ways we relate to one another the word is often translated as kindness.

The ways we best emulate or express God’s love for us, is in being kind to one another.

Perhaps the thing that strikes me most about Laura Jean Truman’s prayer is the way tension and difficulty in Hesed is articulated. It is the struggle of wanting to love as God does and coming face-to-face with our own compassion fatigue, and bringing it earnestly, honestly, and humbly before God’s steadfast and abiding love.

Wanting to do justice and feeling exhausted by the endless work and the small results.

Wanting to love mercy, with enemies that feel relentless in a cruel world.

Wanting to walk humbly, but feeling like nobody has our back and if we don’t look after ourselves nobody else will.

Wanting to be kind, but anger overwhelms us – and you don’t have to search too hard to find reasons for anger in this world.

So, the prayer asks for Hesed in all the ways that means.

“Jesus, in this never-ending wilderness, come us and grant us grace,” Jesus, grant us Hesed.

“Grant us courage, to keep showing up to impossible battles, trusting that is our commitment to faithfulness,” our commitment to Hesed, “that will bring in Your shalom.” Racism, gender equity, homophobia, transphobia, systemic oppression, the housing crisis, human trafficking, - these can feel like impossible battles and the rate of change, will leave us defeated and depleted if we focus only on results.

“Grant us the vulnerability to risk loving our difficult and complicated neighbour, rejecting the lie that some people are made more in the image of God than others.”

This part of the prayer gets me every time, how often do we get caught in that lie. It leads to dismissiveness, disengagement, apathy, and othering. It leads to war and injustice and hate.

Yet, it is the easiest lie to tell ourselves when our neighbour is difficult and complicated and we don't want to have to love them. When they don't vote how we vote, or love who we love. When they won't wear their mask, don't respect public health guidelines, and are dead set against vaccines. When they post false news or unkind things on social media.

Though it is difficult to see it or hear it the image of God is in them somewhere beneath the surface. There are times, particularly in dark, snowy winter nights where I miss seeing the sunset and it is hard to remember the glorious, awe of colour painted across the sky and that such beauty exists. But that same sun a few hours later will spread glorious colour against a desest sky in Tucson. What you see depends on where your looking.

The prayer continues, "Grant us the humility of a decentered but Beloved self." It is a reorientation from self-centredness to Belovedness. It that movement from verses 6&7 from a false sense of our own strength to resting in the strength of God's love and the knowledge that we are beloved by God.

The prayer then moves into intentionality in our walking, taking the single step that is before us and being kept from what we are called to transform. It asks for intentionality in our words, our theology, our activism and our politics.

The last part of the prayer feels to me like a shield against compassion fatigue and burnout.

Keep our anger from becoming meanness.
Keep our sorrow from collapsing into self-pity.
Keep our hearts soft enough to keep breaking.
Keep our outrage turned towards justice, not cruelty.
Remind us that all of this, every bit of it, is for love.
Keep us fiercely kind.

May we continue to do what God requires of us,
Seek justice,
Love kindness
And walk humbly with God, in each and every moment.

To God be all the glory, Amen.