

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
January 29, 2023

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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Micah 6: 1-8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8 N.R.S.V.)

What God Desires in Worship

What is the right way to worship God? What is the best way to worship God?

That was the question when contemporary music and worship came on the scene some 40 years ago. Contemporary worship featured music that was more upbeat in tempo, and the lyrics were often very repetitive. In newer church buildings, pews were replaced by movable chairs. The choir was replaced by a praise band. These praise bands moved away from the organ and used guitars, key boards, and gasp - drums. Hymn books were discarded in favor of projecting the words on overhead screens.

All of these changes met with such resistance and resentment from more conservative church members. So much so that the term, “worship wars,” was used to describe what happened in many churches.

Those who enjoyed the contemporary music and worship style complained about what they called the “funeral music” in traditional churches. They wanted music that was more about praising God and that connected to people’s emotions, not just their intellect. They loved having the words to the music on the screen so that people were worshipping with their heads up and more aware of those around them. They valued a worship style that was more of a celebration. They criticized the traditional church worship as being too much of a downer.

Meanwhile those who valued the traditional worship style were put off by what they saw as the overly emotional content of contemporary worship. They felt that contemporary worship music ignored the intellect. And they wanted their hymns to relate a story that was theologically sound and not just endlessly repeat the same thing. They valued the majestic music of the organ and loved the orderliness of traditional worship. They loved the quiet feeling of being in the presence of the Holy and found in the quieter style of worship a sense of the holy and the sacred that seemed missing in the louder contemporary worship.

To some degree the worship wars still continue. If you want to know what any particular church

member wants in worship, you have only to ask. People are glad to give you their opinion. The much more difficult question is, what does God want worship to be like?

Or maybe it only seems like a more difficult question, because we don't like the answer. Our text for today is from the Prophet Micah. Verse eight is the only well known verse from the whole book of Micah. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

In other words, God says that right worship is not so much about the one hour on Sunday morning, it is more about how we live our lives the rest of the week.

Let's break this down. As the text starts God is complaining that his people are treating him shamefully. In spite of all the good that God has done, in choosing them in Abraham as his special people, in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, in feeding them in the wilderness, in giving them the promised land, and the list goes on and on - in spite of all this Israel has turned their back on God. The people are no longer worshipping God.

The prophet then asks, "How shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" The prophet wants to know what right worship looks like. He then goes on to suggest a few things. Perhaps God desires burnt offerings. Animal sacrifices were required in the Old Testament but they had stopped after the temple was destroyed and the people were carried away into exile. Maybe God wants animal sacrifice brought back.

The prophet is wondering if it is time to go back to the way we used to do things. Maybe they haven't been conservative enough. Would the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Then the prophet goes in the other direction. Maybe they haven't been extreme enough. Maybe it is time for something new, a far greater sacrifice. He asks, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

We might note that human sacrifice was never part of the worship of God in Israel. There is that one odd story about how Abraham believes that God is calling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But in the end, God provides a ram to be sacrificed and Isaac is saved. One of the great differences that set Israel apart for those around them is that they refused to engage in human sacrifice.

Still human sacrifice was practiced by many of Israel's neighbors. So the prophet wonders aloud, maybe they just haven't been extreme enough. No, says God, that is not what I desire.

It is not about how things used to be done. It is not about a bigger check in the offering plate. It is not about some great overwhelming sacrifice. It is about much more than just the hour on Sunday morning. "He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Right worship starts with the realization of what God has done for us. In Christ Jesus, God has given us the free gift of salvation and restored the relationship between God and us. Right worship then is a grateful response to the goodness and love of God. Right worship is not an attempt to gain God's favor. It is instead a response to the favor God has already bestowed upon us.

I invite you to look at each of the three responses that are listed as right worship. **The first is to do justice.** That one needs a little explaining.

Most of us think of justice as what the law court decides. We refer to the law courts as "The Justice System." We also tend to think or at least hope that this justice is about people getting what they deserve, and decisions being made by the court are on the basis of what is fair or right.

Unfortunately our law courts fall far short of that. You may have some very good and understandable reasons for breaking the law. However, the court does not make decisions on the basis of what is reasonable or fair. The court is only concerned about what the law says. You may object that you were only speeding because you were trying to get your loved one to the emergency room quickly. But if the police officer gives you a ticket, you can still be fined. Because that is what the law says.

Additionally we know that those who are rich or powerful are often able to flaunt the law. It is a rare thing for someone who is wealthy to actually spend time in prison. And even if they do, they are often able to arrange a lighter sentence at one of the so called, "Country Club Prisons."

What God wants us to do in justice is much more demanding than law courts. But it also goes beyond what we normally think of as justice. In the Old Testament, the word justice is tied in with righteousness and mercy and compassion. Mercy means sparing someone from the bad things they deserve. Compassion means seeing ourselves in solidarity with those who are suffering.

One of our Bible Study members said that she was raised in a family with money. So she had a car and could get where she needed to be. At that point in her life, she didn't usually give rides to people who didn't have a car. She said that she secretly thought they had brought this on themselves.

But after her life circumstances changed and she didn't have a car for a while, she saw things from a completely different view. Now when someone asks her for a ride, she is much more likely to give them one. That is solidarity.

Justice in the Old Testament sense is not about what is fair or reasonable, it is about having mercy and compassion on those who are hurting. It is about seeking to lift others up.

The second word in our lesson about what the Lord requires of us is to love kindness. That one translates much easier for us. I couldn't help thinking about the fact that most of us have little trouble finding the time and money to do the things we love to do.

I once had a church member in a previous church tell me that he needed to sleep in on Sunday morning and that 11 o'clock was just too early for him to get up and get to church. Later on in the conversation, he told me that he had to get up on Saturday at 4:30 in the morning in order to get to his tail gating spot for the Mountaineer Football game. Most of us find time to do the things we love to do.

In Micah, God says to us, if you want to worship me in the way I desire, then learn to love doing kindness to others. That is a tall order isn't it?

I was talking to a man who had been fired from his job for something he had no control over. When his boss told him he was fired, he also added, "It's not personal, it's just business." The man said to me, "When you are the one being fired, it feels very personal."

The boss in this case may have had been pressured by his boss. He may have felt like he had little choice in the firing. Still, him hiding behind the saying, "It's not personal, it's just business," did not feel compassionate or loving.

Jesus told us that we need to treat others in the same way we would want to be treated. That may sound impossible by mere human efforts. But with God's help we can, not only act in kinder ways, we can come love kindness.

The last word on what God requires of us is, "**... to walk humbly with your God.**"

This last one is easy to say, very hard to live out. I have said this often, but it bears repeating.

There is a God. And you are not God.

Walking humbly with God means getting rid of arrogance and false pride. It means letting loose of the idea that we are better than others.

In matters of what is right and what is wrong - we trust God's judgement.

In matters of what is necessary and helpful - we trust God's judgement.

In matters of faith and practice, in living and in dying - we trust God's judgement and God's love.

Amen.