

God's Agenda

Micah 6:1-8

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 2) 2020

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“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, to love mercy (or kindness), and to walk humbly with your God?”

It is one of the greatest texts in the entire Bible. It’s very old, eight centuries before Jesus. The prophet Micah describes a courtroom scene. God’s people are on trial, ordered to give an accounting, and they ask an important question, the Old Testament equivalent of “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What does God want of us?” “With what shall I come before the Lord?”

“What is God’s agenda?”

God’s people respond with, “Okay, we know we have not done well. But we’re going to do better. We’re going all out. Full sacrifice. Full commitment. Grit our teeth, clinch our fists, and give you everything for an hour on Sunday morning.”

“We shall bring you, God, burnt offerings, and calves a year old. Will that please God? We will bring rams to be sacrificed, thousands of them. Or perhaps ten thousand rivers of oil will get the job done? God, we’ll even bring you our precious firstborn child just like Abraham did a long time ago. Surely all that will impress God.”

In one way or another this was standard religious thinking then and still is today: God wants our stuff, our most valuable stuff. The more valuable the gift, the more God will be pleased with us and bless us. And if a little sacrifice, a little gift brings a little blessing, then big-time sacrifice, great offering all at once will bring tremendous blessing.

Much like the mentality that old Samson had. “Lord, I’ve failed and been a miserable sinner. But now, I’m going all out and bringing down the bad Philistines in one fell swoop.” Sort of like practicing gluttony all week and then a total fasting diet on Sunday. And we wonder why we can’t lose weight.

Then comes one of the great moments in the history of religious ideas, a theological sea change, a moment that will be defining for God’s people, Israel, and for the followers of Jesus.

God doesn’t want lambs and rams and oil and your firstborn. God has told you what is good:

do justice,
love mercy,
walk humbly with your God.

God doesn’t want you to make one big gigantic effort and then forget about God the rest of the week. God wants day-to-day faithfulness. Each day – act justly. Each day – love mercifully, and each and every day – walk humbly with God.

That’s what God wants. That’s God’s agenda.

Who is this God who has this agenda? God is, of course, the all-powerful, transcendent other, the God beyond our greatest imaginings. But now there's this new revelation: God cares. God has a heart. God is involved with human life.

God cares particularly about and wants justice for the small, the weak, the widows and orphans, the children and the immigrant and the prisoner. It is a new and amazing idea of God, a God who cares for the beaten down and the left out, the least, the lost, and the last. Micah says God sees how this world was meant to be; sees people for who they really are, and knows the difference between who we're meant to be from the injustice of the way things are right now.

And God says, each day I want you to love mercy, love kindness. Not simply show mercy, but actually love mercy. In other words, savor it. Relish it. Abide in it. Hesed is the Hebrew word for mercy, sometimes translated as kindness. Mercy or kindness, we are to love it and so much so that we crave it, yearn for it – each day.

Loving mercy daily is no small thing. You know as well as I do that we live in a society that prizes vengeance and is full of anger.

Sharon Parks, Harvard theologian and psychologist tells of being in the grocery store and hearing a big crash just behind her. She quickly turned around and saw a little girl, somewhere around 8 or 9 years old, who was pushing a grocery cart and had cut the corner a little too sharp, hitting the edge of a carefully stacked display of Perrier water bottles crashing to the floor. While the little girl was horrified and embarrassed, the grocery store clerks came quickly and cleaned

it all up. After they were gone, and the little girl was alone with her mother, the mother put her arms around the girl and gave her a warm hug.

Parks said that she saw the mother a few minutes later in another part of the store and said, “I wish we had more mothers like you.” The mother’s immediate response was, “Oh, but it’s so easy to remember” (from Sharon Parks’ “Love Tenderly,” in Brueggemann, Parks, and Groome, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly*, p. 37).

We’ve all been there. We’ve broken something in the grocery store or spilled the milk or broke the vase or ... It was pure accident yet we know the feeling, the embarrassment, perhaps the shame, and we know what it feels like. And maybe we know what it feels like knowing that we’re going to get chewed out over it. But perhaps because we know the feeling, because we empathize, we decide to show mercy instead of anger. We choose kindness instead of shaming. We practice love with a hug instead of hostility and rage.

Finally, Micah says that we are to walk humbly with our God. We walk humbly because God is God and we’re not but also because that is who God is. God walks humbly. This is the same God who walked in the garden at the time of the evening breeze as Adam and Eve hid themselves in their sin (Gen. 3:8). This is the same God who walked for forty years across the wilderness with Moses and the people of God. This is the same God born in a stable, lived thirty years in small town Nazareth and then walked from there to Capernaum and then along the shore of the Sea of Galilee calling young fishermen to drop their nets and follow him. He walked humbly enough that he always noticed people left out and on the margins.

He walked humbly and did justice and loved mercy. He was hung on a cross and after three days was resurrected and walked again among us.

To this day, others who have walked with him, walked to the beat of a different drummer than most of the world. St. Francis of Assisi, who walked every day reciting and meditating the Sermon on the Mount. Clarence Jordan spent his childhood and adolescent plowing behind a mule in Georgia and memorizing the Sermon on the Mount. When he got to the Univ. of Georgia in the late 1930's and tried marching in the ROTC, he couldn't march because his rhythm continued to echo the Sermon on the Mount. Or Ruby Bridges, in 1960 in the first grade walked through crowds of hate-spewing racists as she integrated her elementary school in New Orleans. She stood on the front steps and prayed for her tormenters. And Fannie Lou Hamer in 1962 walking up to the courthouse in Indianola, MS and trying to register to vote. As a result she was beaten, shot at, arrested, and beaten some more. She said later, "I guess if I'd had any sense, I'd have been a little scared — but what was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do was kill me, and it kinda seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."

Or what about John Garland, who is the pastor of San Antonio Mennonite Church (no larger than us)? He was a classmate of Sarah and Jose's at college and in seminary at Baylor. His parents taught them – his mother Diana was dean of the Baylor School of Social Work, and his father, David, was dean and professor of New Testament at Truett Seminary. His church in San Antonio, normal people doing extraordinary and sacrificial ministry among Central American and Mexican refugees who after being held in cages and confinement by ICE, are then dropped

by the busloads at their church. The church shelters them, feeds them, and helps them find family or whatever they need.

Jane remembers a John Garland story when he was in Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, probably not many years after I had his father in seminary in a New Testament class. John was in the fourth or fifth grade and was in a class on baptism and discipleship. John said, “We’re talking about following Jesus. And that means following Jesus to the cross. I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

John knew walking with Jesus was serious business. He knew, even as a child, that it meant service, love, justice, and walking humbly. It might even mean a cross. Some time later, he heard the call of Jesus to take up this cross and follow – to walk humbly with God. John Garland along with these others I’ve mentioned, along with hosts of others each and every day get up, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.