

## Humble, Just and Kind: The Song We Sing and The Gospel We Live

### Micah 6:6-8

There's a popular country song by Tim McGraw you may have heard: Humble and Kind. The chorus goes:

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.

It's like the song we sing at the end of every communion service, with the words of the prophet Micah. And it's a lot like the gospel we live, or try to, around here: Be humble, just and kind. I know no better description on how to live.

### I

Some call these words from Micah the great prophetic summary, capturing the messages of the three great prophets, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God". Micah considers all the offerings we might bring to God, then says, the greatest offering is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly.

Amos was the great prophet of justice. He was an itinerant farm worker traveling around the nation, a shepherd here, a pincher of sycamore trees there.

And from that marginalized vantage point he saw the ravaging injustice of the land. Then God “kidnapped” him —Amos’ words—from behind his flock and called him to be a prophet to the nation. He showed up uninvited at the great annual day of national celebration, like July 4th in Washington DC, or Inauguration Day in January, and began to denounce the great sins of injustice in the nation: You grind the heads of the poor into the dust, you sell the lives of the poor for silver, your courts are a sham and your worship services are fake religion. This is what the Lord wants, he relayed from the Lord: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like ever flowing stream!”

I can hear Martin Luther King, trumpet of God, sounding those words in his “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Justice and righteousness are to flow like a mighty river, as a healing stream though out the land. When we dam up God’s waters with our greed and injustice, there is trouble in the land. The nation begins to wither and die.

There are many Christians today that say that justice has nothing to do with the message of Jesus and the gospel. There was a resolution at a recent SBC Convention Meeting that said there’s no such thing as “social justice” in the Bible—that is, attention given to injustice imbedded in our social structures and laws. Such Christians preach half a gospel—or as we might say today, a third of the gospel.

Have they ever read Jesus words, echoing Micah in Matthew 23:23-4?

“Woe to you—watch out, beware— you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Or, as he might say it today, Woe to you preachers, professors, deacons and Christian politicians, “for you snip and bring your tiny tithes of mint, dill, and cummin, and you have neglected the weightier matters of the Teaching: justice, mercy and faith!” He was passing along Micah’s words: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God. There is no walking with God that is not a humble walking. You can’t strut with Jesus.

He called them “blind guides”. There’s an image! A blind man with a cane leading a nation off a cliff. And he added in the humor of exaggeration: “You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” Picture a person in a fine restaurant. There’s a gnat in the soup. The diner raises Cain with the wait staff. Then he proceeds to swallow a whole camel: head first, whiskers, long neck, crunchy body, finally the back legs and tail. The church can pay so much attention to the lesser things and ignore the really important things. Rev. Barber, a contemporary prophet, says that we say so much about what the Bible say so little and so little about what the Bible says so much! There are over 3,000 verses in the Bible about care for the poor and vulnerable. Yet, they barely find their way into sermons in the church.

So justice: the care for the most vulnerable, fairness in the courts, honesty in the market place, “don’t steal, don’t cheat, and don’t lie.”

## II

But God won’t let us stop there, with justice. A gospel of justice alone is itself a truncated gospel. We need mercy too, and kindness. The great Hebrew prophet of mercy was Hosea. His own life story was a case in point. He married a woman named Gomer. She may have been a prostitute when they married. She may have promised to change her ways, and Hosea loving her so, married her. But then she returned to prostitution. God called Hosea to go after her, forgive her and bring her home. Why, because this is what God is like!

A luminous passage in Hosea are these words, the God of mercy as a grieving mother:

When Israel was a child I loved him.

Out of Egypt I called my son.

But the more I called them, the more they went from me.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,

I took them in my arms, nursed them, dandled them on my knees.

But my people are bent on turning from me.

How can I give you up, Ephraim,

How can I turn you over, O Israel?!

My heart recoils within me,

My compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea 11)

Jesus quoted Micah a number of times. His beloved parable of the prodigal son was the story of mercy at work in the heart of the heart broken father.

So, part of the gospel we live is loving mercy. Not just doing mercy in an obligatory way but LOVING mercy, flinging wide the doors of mercy, because God, as it has to do with mercy, is a spendthrift, and because, wonder of wonders, God has been like that to us.

As we sing Micah's words, we sing "love kindness". Kindness is such a beautiful form of mercy. On our sign as we enter the door the last words are: Be Kind to All. Let it govern our words, guide our hearts, grace our actions. Not that it's easy! The great 19th novelist Henry James gave this advice to his nephew about the secret to life: "There are three things", he said: "The first is to be kind; the second is to be kind. The third is to be kind." As Tim McGraw sings, "Always be humble and kind".

So now to the humble part. The great Hebrew prophet of humility was Isaiah. He saw the Lord high and lifted up in the Temple that day. And the first thing he did was not to go out and say: "How the Lord blessed me today!" But rather, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips!"

Humility comes from the word "humus" or soil. It recognizes that we have come from the dust and without God breathing God's Spirit upon us we are only dust.

Humility is knowing the great distance between who God is and who we are.

Humility is the acknowledgment of the human limits of our own power, knowledge and goodness. It comes as we let go of our illusion of control. As Anne Lamott says of the truth of who we are: "We are so ruined and so loved and in control of so little."

Humility recognizes that in our politics too we are limited in power, knowledge and goodness. There can be such pride in our nation's power, wisdom and goodness. What we call "American exceptionalism" ignores the humanly limitation of our power, knowledge and goodness. But we have unclean lips and dwell among a people of unclean lips.

Humility banishes theological pride: my theology, my church, my worship style, my religion is the right one, yours is inferior.

Humility is always characterized by gratitude. We know how much we've been given, by God, from others. Someone quipped, "Few speak of humility HUMBLY!" That includes the preacher too. "Let me give you the final word on humility!" We all know when real humility happens to us, not put-on humility. We are at the end of our resources; we ask help from beyond. Our best has not been enough. We cry out to a power greater than ourselves. In those moments we experience humility.

This is our song: *Be humble, be just, be kind.*

We are invited today to the table of kindness and mercy today. "Let us break bread together on our knees". Is there any other way to come to this table?

It is a table of grace. As Buechner described grace: "*There is nothing We have to do; there is nothing we Have to do; there is nothing we have to Do.*" We are like someone holding her cup under a waterfall. Our lives are that cup. This is how we come to the table of the Lord, and sing our song.

Amen