January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8

I'm not a bumper sticker fan, truth be told—never had even one on any of the nine cars I've owned in my lifetime. I try not to begrudge people who do bumper stickers (though, I can’t help myself sometimes—whole lot of rudeness out there on the road, right? And then those who get carried away:



But a few I've found to be either amusing or provocative:

*  (Can I get an “Amen!”)
* Or this one: 
* And then, finally:  ****

Some have suggested that if we really want to capture the whole of Christian ethics on a bumper sticker, we’d be hard pressed to find a better example than the last verse of our text, this morning—Micah 6:8:

***"…and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"***

In fact, I've seen that on a bumper sticker—maybe you have, too…



Of course, the problem with bumper stickers (or with tweets, for that matter) is that they’re too easy—too easy to “talk-the-talk” without “walking-the-walk” (or should I say, too easy to “rant-the-rant” ☺). It’s what the prophet Micah understood—what he grieved…

See, seven hundred years before Jesus showed up—before he came to redeem this planet—Israel, God’s people—were in the midst of a revival—the temple was packed, giving was over budget for the first time in, like, forever—only it wasn’t spiritual revival; it was superficial revival. And Micah saw it—understood something was wrong—something was deeply and profoundly wrong in the community of faith. Israel had become arrogant--uncaring… And so the prophet pictures God in this way that has God taking the people to court. They’ve committed a crime—selfishness is criminal, in God’s view. And so God has summoned a great host of witnesses for the prosecution—has summoned the mountains and the hills and the very foundations of the earth as witnesses—witnesses to hear the charges and review the evidence—that there is selfishness in the land—that the people have forgotten God’s generosity to them—forgotten that theirs is a God who delivered them out of slavery—a God who gave them a home--and they have disregarded that love in how they are treating one another.

So God makes the case, and what happens? Well, as usual, the people miss the point. They think God must just be asking them to just dig a little deeper—add a few zeros to their checks… “How about if we go with, say, a thousand burnt offerings--up the ante—make it ten thousand rivers of oil? Will that do the trick--God? Or you want that we should sacrifice our first born children? I mean, what’s it gonna take?” It’s what we do with God, right?—what we do when we separate our religious ritual from our behavior. Because the so-called sacrifices that these people were proposing did not please God. No, God’s looking for something more—something deeper—something that may seem harder, but ultimately, something far more fulfilling and aligned with God’s purpose for the world. “You want to know what God wants?” Micah’s asking. “He’s already told you. And since it appears you’ve forgotten, well, here it is again--a three-part recipe.”

**¹** God want us to do justice. Not to like justice--not to think justice is a good idea--not to assume other people or structures will do it for us--but to do it… And what does that mean? Well, it means, biblically speaking, to be a voice for any oppressed person--for any unprotected person--for widows and foreigners and children—for the vulnerable among us… It means we fight for the rights (and access to basic, human services) for handicapped persons--for minority and elderly persons--for the poor—for every and anybody treated as anything less than God’s very own child.

I was at a worship and preaching symposium this past week—held at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan—got to attend a seminar presented by people from the ***International Justice Mission—***a ministry Park Avenue has a history with over the years… One of the presenters told the story of how God called her to answer a justice calling—the day she saw a poster of a young girl with a single tear running down her face—two sentences written next to that image: “Slavery is alive.” And, “Rape for profit must be stopped.” It was the beginning of an education this woman about a reality in our world horrific beyond her imagining—the fact that some 35 million human beings are owned by slave masters—by evil people who use violence and lies to entrap the most vulnerable of victims. Or the fact that locally, the Twin Cities has been identified as having one of the highest incidence rates of child prostitution in the country—over 200 young girls sold for sex every month. (And on and on it goes…) But rather than being overwhelmed to the point of being paralyzed by those statistics, her life since that moment has been given to the oftentimes slow but perseverant work of joining with God to make a difference. It’s why I’ve been so encouraged by friends here at Park Avenue—those who have refused that paralysis as well—joining together this coming Saturday for a 5K run through the Target Center concourses—an effort to raise money to fight human trafficking. It’s called “Off the Streets,” an event that’s anticipating the Super Bowl coming the Minneapolis a year from now--and with it bringing an influx of literally thousands of victims to serve in the sex industry that week. This is not a “run with a cause” but a “cause with a run”—a way to rise up and say, “Not in our city!” And you can join Paul and Candace Hurckman—our friends at Venture—join them by running, or walking--by sponsoring somebody who does run or walk--by helping to provide hospitality at the event--by praying for those who participate—all kinds of ways to get involved—to take a small step with others, that those impaired by injustice might be restored… We’ve put a link on our website where you can get more information.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Do justice,” Micah says. **²** And, “Love kindness.” Anybody else feeling like we could use a little more kindness in our world just now? In our country, just now? In our community, just now? In your household, just now? People who come to me in preparation for marriage often want to know the secret--what’s the secret of a happy, fulfilling marriage and relationship? So I tell them what the research has shown—what it’s unequivocally shown—that you have to have enough money--wealth and prosperity—that’s the secret. I tell them you have to have a great dog--great in-laws--a terrific sex life. That’s the secret. Actually, no, it’s a car—you want a nice car. And, assuming they haven’t left my office yet ☺, I tell them the truth—what all the research has shown. You want a happy, fulfilling relationship? Try kindness. Nothing else comes close. And the biggest predictor of relationship failure?—it’s what some have called “the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling (which conspire to bring about emotional disengagement). Kindness is an antidote to all that--a fruit of the Holy Spirit--and people who choose to follow God’s lead become the lovers of kindness…

I love stories of kindness. This comes from a waitress—happened last year--instead of bringing a couple of firefighters their check one morning after breakfast, she brought them this thank you note, instead:



Turns out those two men had just spent the past 24 hours battling a blaze at a local warehouse, and this woman had found out about it--so that rather than handing them their bill, she gave them this note she’d written—written on the check: “Your breakfast is on ***me*** today,” it read. “Thank you for all you do—for serving others and running into places everyone else runs away from—no matter your role, you are courageous, brave and strong. Thank you for being bold every single day—fueled by fire and driven by courage. (Now) go get some rest! Love, Liz.” See, being kind is within the reach of anybody, isn’t it? You don’t have to be old enough, or smart enough, or wealthy enough—you can just do it (and so can I…).

Do justice; love kindness, and **³** walk humbly with your God**…** I said a moment ago that what Micah is serving up today is a three-part recipe, and by that I mean we can’t pull the ingredients apart, right? In order for the soup to taste good, you need all three ingredients—justice, kindness and humility. It’s because an arrogant justice simply does not provide lasting change—it’s because kindness by definition can’t be arrogant, right? The Bible says love is patient, it is kind, it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way and is not irritable or resentful. Rather, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things… And God will honor our effort to be advocates of justice and practitioners of kindness when we humbly acknowledge that we can’t do any of that on our own—that in-and-of ourselves we are not enough—we don’t have what it takes—will mess it up every single time—but thanks be to God, with the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and by linking arms with one another, why, we really can “*do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens us*.” Amen?

**Prayer:**

* “O God of all faithfulness, you have called us to be a new community—have given us Jesus as the cornerstone of that community. Forgive us when our fear or anxiety uproots our faith; when our worry and blame breaks our friendships and our marriages and our families. Help us to learn from those who express their faith in different ways, and help us to discover new ways to witness in your world. Reconcile us, Jesus…
* And God of hope—you’re the one who hears the groans of the prisoners, the one who liberates those in despair, the God who comforts… Bring hope to the homeless, and healing to those in pain, and strength to the weak and lonely. Speak your saving health into all the dark places of this world, that a generation not yet born may come to praise your name. Reconcile us, Jesus…
* And God of love—we want to celebrate the greatness of your love, so that we would no longer be divided by the smallness of our own love. Forgive us for being so focused on our own needs that we neglect to build your kingdom—your everlasting kingdom. Save us from considering as normal anything that is an offense to your love. We praise and thank you that Jesus left his royal throne to be a refugee, so that we could be welcomed into his family. Help us never to forget that as we answer the call to reach out to the refugees around us. Help us to bear witness to the love of Jesus for anyone who feels like a stranger in this world. Release us from self-love, and Holy Spirit, keep your love aflame in our hearts. Reconcile us, Jesus… Amen.

1. <http://www.offthestreets5k.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)