

“The Requirements of God”
September 11, 2022

Mark 1:16-20
Micah 6:1-8

It has been said that the most dangerous passages in the Bible are the familiar ones, because we do not really listen to them.¹ If that is the case—and if you *did* listen to the scripture lessons—then you might have the uneasy feeling that we are indeed in very dangerous territory this morning.

We heard the well-known words of the prophet, Micah—that we should do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Those are some of the most familiar words in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are beautiful words. And they speak of a simple way made known in the straightforward requirements of God.

But remember what the people said to the prophet Micah when he spoke: “Do not preach—one should not preach of such things.”

Maybe we can understand why. God’s requirements for human beings are deceptively simple. And in their simplicity, they both convict us of sin and call us to a new way of life.

So often we would prefer a more difficult way—one that seems to require a lot but that can let us skirt the real demands of life before God.

Yes, complex times often need complex solutions. Difficult situations push us toward deep thought and prayer, honest and open conversation, and forthright action.

Quite often, however, a simpler approach is what we need.

In a conversation this past week a member reminded me of the advice: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity.” That’s a bit of a paraphrase of the words of the early German Lutheran, the largely unknown Rupertus Meldenus. His original words, translated from the Latin encourage Christians: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.” And, of course, “charity” is used here to mean “love”—in all things, love. It’s been said that “expressions of unity are as diverse as there are individuals—but that love for one another runs through all of this.”

In all things, love.

We hear in this advice an echo St. Augustine’s suggestion that we “Love and do as you will.” The good saint implies that to the extent that we love God and our neighbor, we will do little damage in our actions.

Simple.

Maybe it is to avoid the difficult work of love that we add other burdens to our lives and to the lives of others as well.

The question we heard in the reading from Micah this morning, the question that the choir *sang* to us asks: “What does the Lord require?” It must be something demanding, something difficult, something complex. *Please let it be* something demanding, something difficult, something complex.

The prophet wrestled with that question:

With what shall I come before God?

Shall I come before God with burnt offerings?

Will God be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

In other words: “How much do I have to *give* in order to *get* God’s favor?”

Micah even goes so far as to ask:

“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression?”

How *much* does God want?

What does God want?

Keep that question in the back of your mind as we reflect on those other familiar words that Jesus speaks to his first disciples—and to us: “Follow me.”

That’s it.

Jesus doesn’t say, “Learn to pray.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Feed the hungry.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “You can *do* better. You can *be* better.”

Jesus doesn’t add, “And be sure to go to church!”

Maybe, in time, those disciples will know and do such things. Maybe, in time, we will as well.

But the first word is simple. It is not a demand, but an invitation: “Follow. Walk along for a while. Watch what I do.”

By walking along, we learn who Jesus is.

By walking along, we learn who we are.

By walking along, we will come to new places that we cannot have imagined.

Follow me. It's as simple as that.

As we follow, however, that nagging question keeps coming back up: Just what does God really want?

The German theologian Hans Kung has been of more help to me in this area than most others. He says: "God wills nothing for God's own sake. God wills nothing for God's advantage or glory. God wills nothing but humankind's advantage, true greatness, and ultimate glory." He concludes: "This then is God's will: our well-being."² God's incarnation in Jesus, the resurrection, the sending of the Spirit—all part of God's work toward what God wants.

What God wants is life, not death

health, not sickness,

love, not hate

peace, not violence

What God wants is fullness of life for each individual and for all people. *What God wants* is our well-being.

It's that simple—and that challenging.

After wrestling with what the requirements of God might be, Micah says: "Listen up! God has told us what is good."

"Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God"—three simple phrases that pretty much sum up the requirements of God.

The justice Micah is concerned with is somewhat different from our modern notion of justice: a decision based on law, handed down in an impartial court. Justice, as we discovered when we listened to Amos a few weeks ago, is about right relationships and the fulfillment of responsibilities that arise out of those relationships—relationships between a ruler and the people, between parents and children, citizens and resident aliens, and so on.³ As the Old Testament scholar, Bernhard Anderson, once put it: "Ethical responsibility...is motivated by the demands and blessings of life in community, within which persons are bound together in various relations and in relation with God."

This congregation is a good a place to practice such a way of life—and in doing so to discover both its demands and its blessings. As we seek right relationships with one another and with God in *this community*, we become better equipped to do justice beyond these walls.

I guess that's a major reason why people decide to belong to congregations.

We want to be with others who have known the kind of questioning and the kind of trust that we have.

We want to be with others who are walking together in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.

We're even willing to put up with all the quirks of everyone else—because we know that everyone else is willing to put up with our own eccentricities.

In this way, when hearing grows dim, when love is slight, when despair and disillusionment grow strong—and you know these things happen—we might find support from one another along the way. There is great comfort and great strength to be found in knowing that we are in this together.

We keep finding that from our efforts in this place on this corner, we are equipped to create right relationships down the block, across the city, and around the world.

Together, we become those who do justice.

Together, we become those who love kindness—or as many translations read: “Love mercy.” Moving through the Minor Prophets, we keep hearing of the mercy of God—as we did in last Sunday's story of Jonah. In Hebrew, the root of the word for mercy means “womb.” It speaks of the motherly love of God who cares for all her creation. And we are called to such care, such compassion ourselves—toward our neighbors, toward all creation. Again, we are called into relationship.

Together, we become those who love kindness.

And together, in relationships of mercy, of loyalty, of love, we discover that more and more, we are finding a deeper grounding of our lives in God, a closeness to our Creator. The Hebrew word for ethics is *halacha*, which means “walking.” The task of ethics, as one person put it, is to help us discover how we might best walk through day-by-day life.⁴

Those in the church in general—and those of us in *this congregation* specifically—find guidance for walking through day-to-day life in Jesus.

We follow Jesus to the place of prayer, a place apart from the noise of the world, apart from the demands of our rapid-paced lives.

We follow Jesus to places where healing is brought to our world. The ministry of Jesus was one of healing the sick, of saying “No” to the powers of destruction—and more importantly, of saying “Yes” to all that gives life. Where there is brokenness, those who are following Christ will be found.

We follow Jesus in bringing good news to all people. He eats with sinners and outcasts. He speaks to the poor *and* to the rich a message of the nearness of the reign of God. No person, no group is excluded from the love of God that is drawing near.

We follow Jesus to resurrection—from death to life. Resurrection is not what was done once but what is in the making now. Resurrection is the process whereby we who were dead are finding new life and sharing that life with others.

Listen, for the call still comes: “Follow me.” The One who offers this invitation is so compelling that we follow along as best as we know how. Maybe we even discover new ways of walking along with him.

Together, we walk humbly with our God.

God has told us what is good: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Simple—deceptively simple requirements that, as I warned you, convict us of sin and call us to a new way of life.

Convicted and called, let us continue to act, to love, and to walk humbly together that we might discover what God wants: our well-being.

¹ John Meier, *Interpretation*, July 1990, pg. 281

² Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*

³ Bernhard Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets*, pg. 43

⁴ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, pg. 192-193.