How Shall We Come before the Lord?

(Bumper Sticker Theology)

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

January 29th, 2016

**Scripture:** Micah 6:1-8

“God 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?”

For some, the text we read today, from the Prophet Micah, is known as the “Golden text of the Old Testament.” It is the answer to the question

that every person of faith asks at some time: what is it that should we do to respond to the grace and mercy of God? What are people of faith supposed to do?

Micah wastes no words with this succinct phrase. It is bumper sticker theology: catchy, to the point, almost a “sound bite.” It’s even tweet-able, give or take punctuation and a couple of dispensable words.

This particular sound bite has been successful. People know about it. In fact, when searching a site selling bible verse bumper stickers, this verse comes up on the first page. The idea of justice, kindness and walking humbly with God is very present, even in today’s culture. People who do not attend church, and those from other faiths, know that this is central to Judeo Christianity.

Now, to be honest, sometimes I become a little frustrated by our culture of sound bite and bumper sticker theology. Isolated biblical quotations are frequently taken out of context. The complexity of the situations they were intended to address is lost. In this case, though, simplicity is the point.

The Prophet Micah sets up the passage we read as though it was a court case between the people of Israel and the Lord. More than 700 years before the birth of Christ, Micah is speaking during a relatively prosperous time for the people of Israel.

But the behavior of the leaders and those in positions of power is not pleasing to God. They are neglecting their own orphans and widows. And even though they are in a position to be generous they are arrogant and uncaring toward the foreigners of neighboring tribes. They pretend not to “get it.” “How can we do more to please you, O God?” They are being disingenuous.

Their scriptures and their law make it plain: they are to care for the poor, the orphan and the widow and they are to welcome foreigners to the land God has given them.

Deuteronomy 10:18 tells them "[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing."

Deuteronomy 15.11 says “For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.”

God’s people are to make foreigners welcome in their land. They are to remember that they have also had the experience of being strangers in a foreign land years before, when were freed from slavery in Egypt.

But in spite of all this, rather than challenging themselves to increase in mercy and generosity, the tone of the defendants is that of self-congratulation.

They are essentially asking “what more could we possibly do to please God?” They exaggerate their piety with offers of extravagant animal sacrifices. They even go to far as to suggest human sacrifice, which is certainly not a part of acceptable religious practice.

Then, Micah responds with the words of God, “God 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?”

So simple. How could we, humanity, we, Christians, we, the church, possibly get it wrong? And to be truthful, we often get it right.

We *are* merciful, *you* are merciful. I see you all making meals for the hungry; stocking shelves at the food pantry; visiting the sick; caring for both human and non-human family members of this church; caring for people struggling with addiction; teaching immigrants who need more education to get along.

And as a church we are working so hard at getting permitting, so that we can continue our ministry of welcoming youth groups from other parts of the country. Then we can facilitating *their* ministries of kindness and justice for the homeless and poor of Boston.

The other day, though, I was feeling so disappointed with the self-congratulatory tone of our nation’s leadership. So I began I looking for places where kindness and justice and humility were being practiced. The rehab facilities I visited on Wednesday afternoon provided perfect examples. There I found nurses, aides, and therapists. One was literally walking slowly and patiently behind a patient testing out new knee or hip. All this was going on while the nations leaders were ranting, and the press was getting riled up. Meanwhile the people working in the rehab, who represent the melting-pot of America, were carrying out Micah’s directive to be kind and merciful and just.

Now, I am not concerned that you are not kind, my friends. I know that you are. And it is my hope that our church will grow stronger and healthier so that we may grow in our kindness too.

But what I am concerned about is this: sometimes circumstances call us churches and individuals to greater, more explicit, acts of justice. And, I fear that such circumstances may be coming upon us now.

When Micah gave God’s directive to the people of Israel, he reminded them that God had brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. The time of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt is buried deep in pre-history. Micah wrote ~700 years before Christ. But he is calling the Israelites to remember back another 700 more years to the time of their migration into the Promised Land. This is the cultural DNA that gives rise to the command to love the aliens in the land.

My friends, even if our ancestors came to the United States on the Mayflower, it’s been no more than 400 years since any of us were immigrants in this land. For many of us, like me, it was much more recent. And so, I suggest, that we, like the Israelites are called to love the aliens in our land at a time when immigrants are becoming very fearful.

This may mean taking that bumper sticker theology and applying it to something more risky than we have ever confronted before. Because, while some Christian groups seem distracted by other things, we may very well be the ones who are called to point to this Judeo-Christian directive for our culture. We may be called to stand up for just, kind and generous treatment of foreign visitors to this land who belong to different religious traditions, such as Islam.

We may feel doubtful that this is the place for Christians to get involved. This may sound rather costly, perhaps too political. I know that is often my rationale. I figure that someone more politically motivated, someone who is naturally given to advocacy is better suited for this work. But, this week, especially following the Holocaust Remembrance Day on Friday, I have felt challenged by the Micah’s verse. The example of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, comes to mind.

During the rise of Nazism in Germany, Bonhoeffer did not remain in the ivory towers of academia. Instead he joined with other intelligentsia in Germany in a plot to kill Hitler. This was the only path they could imagine to stopping the mass genocide of European Jews. Bonhoeffer died at the hands of the Nazis for his part in the plot.

Bonhoeffer’s writing makes it clear, to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow Micah’s directive, can be a costly business.

Well, I am not involved in any such plots. I doubt my courage would extend that far. But I am trying to come up with actions that will help me to enact Micah’s directive to justice. I have been involved in a couple of gatherings already, one of which was at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center just a few weeks ago.

During this event, some 2,600 people of all faiths, races, ages were welcomed to the Islamic center. When all the seating filled up, the Muslim leader hosting the event called on regular members to give their seats up to guests. He asked for priority to be given to any elderly people and people with disabilities who needed to sit. Then, during a time of sharing, I talked with a young woman who was a student in a local college. She told me of a time, while she was in High School, when she had been verbally assaulted by a parent of a fellow student because she was Muslim. This incident had left her shaken and fearful.

Since that time, I have been on the look out for ways to reach out to the Muslim community. This week I heard of an event being hosted by the Dorchester Arts Collaborative, on February 5th. Participants will make love cards to be sent to the Islamic Center as a gesture of love for our Muslim neighbors. Those who cannot attend the event may make cards at home and mail them in. Perhaps this is a place to begin to enact justice for the most recent immigrants in our land.

When I was preparing the sermon this week, I had the option of preaching either on Micah’s text, or the passage from the gospel of Matthew. The gospel passage is from the Sermon on the Mount, which is considered the teaching central to Jesus’ ministry. The excerpt we read today is known as “the Beatitudes”:

blessed are the poor …

blessed are those who mourn …

blessed are the meek …

blessed are those who hunger and thirst

for righteousness …

blessed are the merciful …

blessed are the pure in heart …

blessed are the peacemakers.

The beatitudes say more or less the say thing as Micah, but they wont’ fit on a bumper sticker.

So today, I’m saying, let’s keep it simple. What does the Lord require of us, oh Wollaston Congregational Church … (All join in) “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”

Amen