

What Does the Lord Require

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 8, 2019 <> *Welcome Sunday*
Text: Micah 6:6-8

Fall is in the air, especially in the last few days, as cool weather pushes away the summertime muggies. This is the time of year when we turn our attention away from fun in the sun and back to those things in which we invest our time and energies the rest of the year. For parents of children and youth, school resumes and the crazy, packed schedules that come along with it. For others, the return of fall once more reminds us of those things we've set aside during the summer months when "taking it easy" is the order of each day. Even in the church we take full advantage of the lazy days of summer to relax our efforts when it comes to Sunday worship not to mention board and committee work. That's why in recent years most churches, ours included, have taken to having a Welcome Sunday or an Open Doors Sunday or a Homecoming Sunday as a way of gently nudging folks back into the pews after a summer's respite. Thus today.

This is not really a new tradition. It's been around for ages in the church, especially when it comes to the resumption of Sunday School classes every fall. Rally Day, as these celebrations were called, was a huge celebration of the Opening Day of Sunday School, a major Sunday in most churches. Teachers and students

would receive a special prayer of blessing before heading off to classes. Churches would be packed on Rally Day but then attendance would dwindle from week to week.

These were the glory days of churches here in the US, when churches were full and youth groups bulging. But it's not that way anymore, not in the vast majority of churches anyway. Churches are struggling. All churches, not just the small ones like ours. This struggle is visible in what's known as the "mainline" churches – the denominational churches like the Methodists, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Lutherans and the Congregationalists. The Catholic Churches are struggling too with a major credibility problem on several fronts – the abuse scandals still being revealed as well as very public stances taken against the ordination of women, birth control and the LGBTQA community. Recently even the more conservative evangelical Protestant churches are seeing their numbers fall. Churches like the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptists, the many Free Baptists churches and 7th Day Baptists right here in our area are all seeing their numbers of people and finances drop. Even the big mega-churches still popular in some areas are feeling the hit as more and more Americans identify as religious non-church goers or as intentionally non-religious. This is the new reality.

So, what's going on here? What's happened that so many people have turned away from organized religion in a little more

than a single generation? What happened to the huge Sunday Schools and youth groups that were reality for my children? Is society to blame? Too many choices on Sunday mornings? Too much screen time even for the littlest children? Or is it somehow the church's fault, speaking now of the church writ large? Too many scandals, too much hypocrisy, too much not practicing what was being preached, too big a gap between the Gospel being preached and life being lived?

Yes, to all those questions. You won't be surprised to know I reflect on and pray about this topic constantly. Why are sanctuaries filled with open spaces instead of people? Why do parents see more value in Sunday morning sports than in what the church could mean to their children? At least part of the answer to this conundrum is in the institution of church itself. Wonderful, vital and important ministry happened and happens still in this church and other churches because a core group of the faithful make it happen. That's amazing and incredible and directly attributable to the presence of the Holy Spirit! But, dear friends, we need so much more than a core group of people to be the church God needs us to be at this moment in history. Yes, Jesus said where 2 or 3 are gathered he is present and he meant it, I know. Jesus was not about numbers as a measure for success. But remember he would have thousands of people come to hear him preach and teach. Why? Because he knew what it was God

was asking of him, expecting of him and of those would follow him. Jesus knew what it was God required of him and he did it. And, in responding to God so simply and powerfully he changed what it meant to be a person of faith forever. Jesus distilled down the teachings of Scripture into one simple rule to live by: Love God with all that you are and all that you have and love your neighbor as yourself. That's it. For Jesus faith was never just a set of rituals repeated weekly nor a statement of belief repeated like a magic talisman. For Jesus faith was a way of life, a way of living each day in a relationship with God.

What does the Lord require? Jesus knew it and taught anyone and everyone who would listen. Micah knew it hundreds of years before Jesus was alive to talk about it. Think about that for a moment. Micah was a prophet of the kingdom period in Israel, 800 years before Jesus was born, serving as a prophet under three different kings. He was a contemporary of a few other prophets, like Isaiah, only his perspective was that of a person from a small town in the countryside rather than someone born and raised in a city like Jerusalem. Micah, as a prophet, was responding to what he saw happening all around him and what upset him the most, what really set him off, was the lack of justice for the people struggling every day just to survive and the lack of kindness, simple human kindness, in people's interactions. Micah was really angry that people thought all that was required for

them to find favor with God was to observe the rituals and requirements for sacrifice spelled out in the Scriptures. That's what he's talking about in verses 6 & 7 of today's text. "With what shall I come before the Lord," he asks rhetorically. Shall I come with perfect sacrifices to offset my sins? Or, does God require something more than stuff, more than ritual done for selfish reasons. What does the Lord require *of you*, Micah asks, and his question still rings across the millennia. We know this question because it is still ours.

Micah's question, and the answer he provides, dear friends, is both the diagnosis of the problem the church is experiencing and the answer it needs to live into reality to thrive once more. And I'm talking about all churches, now, not ours specifically. Actually, this church is doing pretty well, holding its own financially and numbers-wise. We're doing some incredible, exciting ministry for a church this size. But we can do better. We must do better, because God is counting on us to do so. Why? Because God is disappearing from life all around us a little bit more every day. People turn to the internet for answers on just about everything these days, relying on their own limited abilities to figure out the vagaries of life. In contrast to the problem Micah faced, our issue today is not people relying too much on orthodoxy of religious practice to be right with God – doing the rituals of the church in precisely one correct one way. No, for us, the exact

opposite is the problem. Too many people find *no* value today in the religious rituals which used to bring God into daily life, into the most sacred moments of life. Let me explain.

I have recently discovered some fantastic television shows produced by Netflix and one of my favorites stars Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin in *The Kominsky Method*. Briefly, this is the story of two aging men in Hollywood, one an actor turned acting coach (Michael Douglas) and the other a very successful agent (Alan Arkin). The two men have been close friends for years, a relationship that changes when the wife of Norman Newlander, the agent, dies. Just before her death Norman's wife, Eileen, asks Sandy Kominsky, the acting coach, to take care of Norman after she is gone. The writers manage to make this scene both deeply moving and funny but then emotions escalate off the rails when they have to plan Eileen's funeral. It seems she left very specific instructions: A coffin made from driftwood or the planks of a sunken ship, Jay Leno to emcee, Patti LaBelle to sing *Lady Marmalade* and Barbra Streisand to sing *Memories*. Sandy manages to pull it off, although he has to settle for a drag queen Barbra impersonator. Now, if you think this sounds more like an episode of the Tonight Show than a funeral, you'd be right. Despite taking place in a chapel decorated with a menorah and stained-glass windows, God was no where present in this service.

The lyrics to *Lady Marmalade* alone make that clear. If you don't know them, google them. I did. Not a song for a funeral.

Yes, funny television episode, but sadly, all too accurate of what is happening these days. There has been a huge shift in what society considers an acceptable rite of passage for the end of someone's life and in this is a snapshot of how much God has been removed from our lives. In a surprising number of instances, there is no religious ritual at a funeral. No God. No looking to something beyond life on this earth. No acknowledgement that there is or even could be something more. This is reflective of the complete absence of God in so many people's lives because the church has too often made itself irrelevant, failing to meet folks' needs in a way that made sense in the context of their lives. So, when grief and loss confront them, they have no clue about where to turn for meaning and purpose beyond the loss. They have no source for hope beyond their own very limited resources. God is absent from their lives so their search for meaning is limited to their own imaginings.

Society's question these days seems to be "who needs God?" instead of "what does God require?" Surely we must answer this first question before we can answer the second. Who needs God? Dear friends, we do. We need God. Every moment of every day. We need God more than God needs us, that's for darn sure, and it's just too easy to forget that. Micah knew it 800 years before

Jesus was born. Jesus knew it more than 2000 years ago. They both knew it's just too easy to forget God, and what's important to God. It's just too easy to substitute what we think God will tolerate for what God actually wants. The thing is, every time we do that, God slips a little further away from us. Every time we put what we think, what we want, what we believe we need ahead of what God created us to be, then we push God away, and we push ourselves closer to the empty oblivion of a life lived only on human terms. In doing this we make ourselves believe that the answer to Micah's question – what does the Lord require – is irrelevant because we already have all the answers that matter. But of course, we don't. We don't have all the answers. Heck, we don't even know all the questions. Our perspective is too narrow. Our scope of understanding lacks depth grounded as it is only in ourselves. What does the Lord require of us? Honestly, left to our own devices, we don't have a clue.

That's where the church comes in. The church serves as our guidepost through life with God as our companion. The church is where we come together to help each other discover, recover and put into practice what it means to be a person of faith in a world trying to push God totally out of picture. Put another way, the church is where we practice living as people of faith in a world where *Lady Marmalade* is sung at funerals. What does the Lord require? Micah's answer says it all – to seek justice, to love

kindness and to walk humbly with God. The first two tell us about how we are to live in relation to other people – justly and kindly. The third one, the final one, talks about God. We are to walk humbly with God. Humility is how one comes before God and remains with God throughout eternity. Without humility as the foundation, there is no justice, no kindness, because human arrogance gets in the way every time.

Dear friends, what does God require? Humility, justice and love from everyone, for everyone. The complicated and challenging work of a lifetime to be sure. Thank goodness the church is here to help. We could never do it on our own. Amen.