

## ***What About God's Expectations?***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 12, 2023

Text: Micah 6:6-8

*“What does the Lord require of you?  
What does the Lord require of you?  
Justice, kindness, walk humbly with our God.  
To seek justice, and love kindness  
...and walk humbly with our God ...”*

This simple text from one of the minor prophets, Micah, encapsulates for me, and so many others, what it means to live in relationship with God. He poses the question directly – what does God require of you – and then he answers it, simply and directly. Especially remarkable here is that Micah’s synopsis of faith is virtually identical with what Jesus taught even though Jesus lived hundreds of years after Micah. So, we need to remember that “the Lord” Micah is referring to here is not Jesus, but God. Micah knew of the promised Messiah certainly, but when he wrote these words, he had no idea Jesus would ever exist.

This matters because the notion of God’s expectations for us follow a through line that begins in Genesis and ends with Revelation. The entire Bible, Hebrew Scriptures and Christian, chronicles the people’s efforts to understand God and what it means to be in relationship with this powerful and at times confusing Being. God’s hopes for the people have always been the same. God always expects us to have a sense of right and wrong, a sense that doing the right thing even when it’s the more difficult thing, is what we are to do as followers of the living God. We are also to love kindness, an interesting choice of words which is no doubt why some translations have this word as mercy rather than kindness. But is Micah really saying here that all we need to do is recognize that kindness is a good thing, something lovable? Not hardly. Kindness, treating others

gently with respect and integrity, is to be the cornerstone of how we move through every day of our lives. And if so many of the behaviors we are all witnessing more and more of each day are any indication, none of us are very good at kindness. Then comes the real kicker – walking humbly with God. What does that even mean? Well, pretty much what it says – to remember with every step we take throughout our lives that we are not God and never will be. We are to remember that the world does not revolve around us and what we want, how we feel, what we are angry or worried or sad about. Truth is, each of us are one in the midst of billions. And yet, the Scriptures tell us God knows each of us so well that God knows how many hairs we have on our head. That is the miracle and majesty of God, and we can never, ever come close to being that ourselves. Therefore, we are to acknowledge that simple fact with humility every day.

I always include a video in the *Sabbath Circles At Home Sunday School* lesson I post on our Facebook page each week and I especially love the one I found for this Sunday. It's actually a mini-sermon on this text given by a muppet-looking creature called Douglas. What I like about Douglas' message for children is the analogy he used to explain how these three expectations of God work together to create our relationship with God. Douglas talks about going camping with his family and how his father taught him to make a campfire. His dad told him you must have three things to make a campfire: fuel (the wood and other things that burn to get it started); heat (the spark that ignites the wood) and oxygen. You cannot make a fire without all three of these basic things. If you have something to burn and a match, but you're trying to make the fire underwater without oxygen, it won't work. If you have oxygen and a match, but nothing to burn, it won't work either. Nor will it if you have wood and oxygen but no spark to light the wood. (Yes, I know all you scouts and hunters out there could start the fire without a match, but work with me on this,

okay?) So, if you have all three elements – wood, spark and oxygen – in no time you will have a roaring fire that provides warmth and light in even the darkest night. That, Douglas says, is what it’s like to have a true relationship with God, a life transforming experience of what it means to live with God as an active partner in your life. <sup>1</sup>

I really like this image of the campfire for what it’s like to build a relationship with God, an essential element to being able to live a life of faith with God as your companion and your partner. If we think of faith as the fire, we can see that it is created by and grows stronger because of all three elements in Micah’s answer to the question of what God requires of us. Doing justice is first because love and justice are always hand in hand. You cannot love someone – truly love them – if you treat them badly. You cannot say you love God if you treat the people you like well and the people you dislike poorly. You cannot say you love God if you think its okay to treat some people – “those” people – whoever that might be to you, differently than the people who are like you. That is not justice, and God is just not having it, no matter what we might want to think to the contrary.

Loving kindness also adds to the strength of the flames of our faith because you cannot have justice – fair treatment for all, the sense that right and wrong is the same for everyone – without having kindness as the centerpiece for that justice. Treating everyone with kindness, with the sort of mercy and respect you want for yourself, is the only way justice is even possible in any situation. Put another way, if you are intentionally unkind to someone, I doubt you will care at all if they are being treated fairly in a given situation. It’s just a nonissue because if you are able to treat someone unkindly on purpose, it can only be because you see them as somehow less than you are. God is nowhere in that calculation I can assure you. And

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL6Uma5bcF4>

nothing extinguishes the flames of faith faster than being mean to somebody, just because you can, just because you think they deserve it. That judgement is never yours to make. And yet we saw that on full display this past week during the President's State of the Union speech. I don't know about you, but I actually found the heckling frightening as well as disturbing. But we make the decision to be unkind all too frequently in our own lives, don't we? I know I do, usually when I am in a hurry to get someplace, and someone pulls out right in front of me and then slows down to a crawl. My thinking toward that person in that moment has little to do with loving kindness as a pathway to my relationship with God. And that's when I try to remember to pause and move on to the third piece of Micah's formula – walking humbly with God.

When I am angry with someone, irritated with someone, just plain upset about something, I admit that Micah's formula for faith is not the first thing that comes to mind. I had an unpleasant experience this past week with a misdiagnosed dental situation. I was angry at the doctor who misdiagnosed it. I was angry at his receptionist who also screwed up the insurance coverage for the third time. I was grumpy that I was in such pain. I was irritated that the whole thing took a lot of time and left me in a lot of discomfort. I was not feeling loving or kind toward any of them in that moment. I was, however, confident that I had been treated unjustly and that I therefore had a right to be angry. But guess what. When the condition was finally treated correctly by a specialist and the pain started to go away, I realized I wasn't so angry anymore. Then I realized I was actually feeling bad that I had gotten so angry. When I calmed down, I realized I had not been treated unjustly, even though it felt that way in the moment. The doctor had just made an honest mistake and so had his receptionist. They had obviously not intended for me to hurt any longer than needed. They had not intended to upset or anger me.

They just made mistakes that were aggravating, to them and to me. I realized that I needed to treat them justly by giving them the benefit of the doubt based on previous experiences with that office which had been fine. I now understood that I needed to be kind to them when I realized how bad they truly felt about what happened to me. I figured out it was time for me to start walking humbly with God instead of feeling sorry for myself. This was not easy for me to do because I had been in a lot of pain for days because of the way the whole thing had been handled. Frankly, I had a right to be angry in one sense. But, I realized, I want to be the kind of person who walks humbly with God, someone who wants to look for and find the good in people instead of always expecting the bad. I knew I needed to be kind to them because that was the only way I could let go of my own anger and frustration at the whole mess. In other words, I needed to be humble more than I was angry. I needed to acknowledge that my anger was hurting me much more than it was them because it was creating distance between me and God.

Now, please do not mishear what I am saying. I am not saying there are never situations in which injustice demands you to speak out. Of course there are. We have talked about many of them here in recent weeks. Hunger, homelessness, war – all of these are inherently unjust situations which demand us as God’s Beloved people to speak out against them, to do whatever we can to address them, because they demean the very people God loves and expects us to love. That, dear ones, is seeking justice in the truest sense Micah was writing about. So too when we use our voices for people who have no voice – the poor, the homeless, the refugees – that is loving kindness. We are using our voices to demand unjust situations be recognized and rectified. Dear ones, this is Micah’s whole point! Doing justice for others who are powerless to seek it for themselves is a foundational piece of the way we love God. Loving kindness by showing it to the

people who are the least of these, forced to the margins of life by circumstances beyond their control – this too is part of how we love God, of how we follow Jesus. As we do, we need to accept that our responses to these unjust and unkind situation must be undertaken with a deep sense of humility. It's also worth noting that this humility often manifests as a sense of really not wanting to engage with the situation at all. That whole “I don't want to get involved” mindset but we do anyway, that is when we are truly walking with God. Because, dear ones, often when we are walking humbly with God, it is not on a sun-dappled lane through beautiful countryside. It's not walking down the aisle of the church either. Often walking humbly with God leads us through uncomfortable, ugly places because that's where our presence – our doing justice, our loving kindness – is most needed. Standing outside next Saturday at our Homeless Awareness Prayer Vigil, that's walking humbly with God. Calling out unjust or unkind behavior when it tries to pull us into its orbit, that's walking humbly with God. Dear ones, these daily journeys of humility are never easy, but they are vital, to yourself and all the people suffering needlessly as the result of unjust or unkind actions toward them by others.

In closing, I'd like to reference yesterday's Daily Devotional published by the UCC Still Speaking writers' group. In it, Pastor Kaji Dousa offers a slightly different spin on the same topic Micah is writing about – how can we have a relationship with God? What does it take, what does it require of us? She offers three questions, and the answers as well. They are:

*“Who are you? A child of God.*

*Why are you here [on this earth]? To love and serve God.*

*What does this look like [for you]? Share your gifts.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/tesoro/>

Pretty simple on the surface, and yet not really. She observes that we should not hear these questions as an ask from God or anybody else to do more than we think we are capable of. Instead, she encourages us to see here an invitation to share your gifts as a spiritual practice, an action which through doing it brings you closer to God. She also reminds us of a very important distinction. She reminds us that this invitation to share your gifts calls upon “your gift as that thing you can’t help but share. Where, at the end of sharing it, you feel full, not empty. Because your cup runneth over.”<sup>3</sup> Sharing these gifts, she says, is renewing and refreshing because after sharing them, you feel full, not empty. That, dear ones, is grace lived and experienced. That is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Every step of every day.

Is this easy to do? NO! Is it worthwhile? Yes, in more ways than you might think possible. Do you have to figure out how to do this all by yourself? Definitely not! That’s why we’re here – your church family. What better place to practice, to experience, what it means to love God with all that you are and all that you have than here? We’re all trying to figure this out! None of us can do this on our own. We need the comfort and reassurance of this church family of ours as we work together to become who it is God expects us to be. It is quite literally the work of a lifetime and it’s so much better when we do it together. Thanks for being here... Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.