



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Micah 6:1-8

Pleasing God

Intro: Our Old Testament lesson is from Micah. To hear this passage, consider a court of law. God has a complaint with Israel, and calls the mountains to witness to what has gone wrong. God recalls their shared history, and reminds everyone how God freed and saved Israel. The prophet Micah gives a profound reply to God's inquiry: his words are some of the most famous in the Old Testament "God does not require huge offerings, but rather wants justice, kindness, and that the people walk humbly with God."

If we can, it is rather dramatic to envision this passage actually and literally taking place. Think of this exchange in scripture as a court room scene where God comes as the plaintiff - it seems like this debate is going to be a rather one sided, or at least lopsided event. I for one don't want to be on the other side of this interrogation, but the truth is we all are. We are on the other side of the room and God asks tough, soul searching questions that apply to each of us. As I picture this moment, I see it happening out doors, with God's booming voice resounding to the hills

and mountains asking, "what have I done to you? How is it that you would grow weary of me?"

A key part of understanding this that we don't know is how God asks these questions. We don't know the tone of God's voice in this, and the tone would make a great deal of difference on how we interpret the moment. It could be that God asks this question sounding rather like a parent saying to a child. "I raise you all these years, I got up with you in the middle of the night and now you treat me like this?" Or perhaps it sounds like two people

who were in love, now separated, who ask "what did I do to you to make you turn away?"

No matter what the tone, the passage starts with this powerful question "what have I done to you?" How does one respond to that? What do you say when promises are broken between two people? How do you get things together again, set the relationship back on its feet and on the right track once again after a break has occurred and someone asks from deep within the questions "What have I done to you? Why do I deserve this?"

God preempts any answer by saying remember our shared history. If we wondered where God was going with these questions, it is now clear that a loving reconciliation is what God has in mind. "Remember our relationship in the past. How I was there for you in times of need, and in your celebrations." Looking back is a beginning of setting things right. "See where we have come together to this point. See what has been most important. I was there, and we made promises. I would be your God and you would be my people." That was important. It still is. Then God says, here are things that are not life giving to our relationship, here are things that do not matter to me, or things that keep us from getting back on the right

track; these things that don't help are bowing down, bringing burnt offerings, oil, even firstborns. That's not what I want says God.

That is not going to make a difference in the living relationship between God and humans. Those things, or actions do not bring us closer to what is in God's heart. Rather than try to directly answer God's charges of the broken relationship, Micah takes us away from the courtroom and begins to answer another question, and see how he has re-framed it, God asks "what have I done to you?" And Micah speaks out loud of what is pleasing to God. He tells of God's hope for a significant relationship with each of us.

God desires a certain way of being for each of us. A certain posture toward life that is pleasing to God and also good for us. The passage from Micah lists three ways of being, or "ethics" for Christians, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. Each of these could be a sermon in itself and today. I won't do that but rather just touch on what these passages bring before us as we as we seek to be faithful to God, and as we wonder what will please God.

Doing justice is a challenge, it calls us to think of our neighbor, to risk

considering how our actions impact others and to see how our gains can often be someone else's losses. To do justice is to act with the other's welfare in mind, to love our neighbor as God loves them, which is as God loves us. It can often mean self-sacrifice. There are many examples of how justice goes unserved in the world around us, and within our closest relationships. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Doing justice is not simply locking people up for crimes, it is speaking the truth in love to all forms of power and acting to ensure that selfish personal gain ever trumps the common good. Doing justice happens when watchdog groups or whistle blowers speak up whenever laws and ethics are broken. Doing justice happens when a young child says stop being a bully.

The second call of loving kindness shouldn't be so hard. But it can be. When we must put away our grudges, set aside our favorite gossip. To love kindness is to act with that love and to always err on the side of the kinder response. That is hard, and that is God's preference for us. To be kind and forgiving with one another, just as God has been with us. There is nothing glamorous about kindness, but it holds the world together in a more hopeful way than the violence and destruction on which too many

depend. Kindness is the evidence and manifestation of love. It is one of the obvious indicators of God's spirit in our lives.

Walking humbly with our God is also a difficult one. Humility isn't a trait that has much appeal in our "post-modern" world. We like to see ourselves as a "can-do" culture -- bursting at the seams with good ideas, good intentions and good results. Humility, on the other hand, suggests to us a sense of helplessness. It is the quality that admits there are things we cannot do, problems we cannot solve, forces we cannot control. This "cannot" admission clashes terribly with our "can-do" arrogance. Frederick Buechner says, "True humility doesn't mean thinking ill of ourselves, but of not thinking of ourselves much differently from the way we would think of anybody else." Humility is this peculiar combination of letting go of excessive pride and arrogance, and then claiming our absolute dependence on God. Walking humbly with God happens when we live in the strength and peace of the One who in days past and in days to come renews us and makes us whole. How do you know? You just know.

During the forty days of Lent, Christians are encouraged to practice spiritual disciplines that help us grow

in relationship with God. Many people this time of year think about something to give up, as a way of reminding themselves of their relationship to God and what Christ gave up for us. So people may give up coffee, or chocolate, or some other daily thing, that will remind them of their relationship to God. And their need of God's grace. Recently churches have been encouraging people to give themselves to something as a sign of their faith, rather than giving something up.

Time is one of the most precious things we have, and so committing time to praying, reading scripture, writing our feelings down in a journal may be difficult to do, but they are powerful gifts we can give God and give ourselves. These are spiritual things we can do during lent and perhaps even continue throughout the year. And we will grow in our knowledge of God's active presence in our lives, and beginning to move toward the goals of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.

We must take note that of these three things, these ways of being, two of the three involve other people. At the core of "doing justice" and "loving kindness" is the basic issue of human to human relationships, how we relate

to one another. God's declaration of what matter most, is greatly concerned with how we love and treat one another. And the last command, to walk humbly with our God, can be understood as "living in communion with God". Do we see God as a constant companion that we rely on?

As we strive to know God in deeper ways this Lent, let us try some new discipline, some way of asking deeper questions of our selves, and perhaps see how we may change our lives to become even more pleasing to God. Amen.