

God's Unfolding Love

COMMUNION

February 2, 2020

Micah 6: 6-8

⁶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He 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?

Matthew 5: 1-12 (The Message)

¹⁻² When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said: ³ "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. ⁴ "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. ⁵ "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. ⁶ "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. ⁷ "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for. ⁸ "You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. ⁹ "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.

That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.
¹⁰ "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. ¹¹⁻¹² "Not only that — count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens — give a cheer, even! — for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.



Today we continue in our "Seeing 20/20 in 2020" sermon series with "God's Unfolding Love". For the first three weeks we have looked at how the four Old

Testament covenants defined who God's chosen people were and how the covenant we find in the New Testament began to open the circle, so to speak. Last week we began to look at how we are called to live out our human-divine relationship as guided by the new covenant and by its mediator, Jesus Christ.

Today, as we worship and celebrate communion together, we will review what God requires of us as well as remembering what God's unfolding love can and will do for all who believe. Let us pray...

Turn with me in your Bibles to Micah 6. Micah was one of the last of the prophets in the Old Testament. Micah would be a contemporary of Isaiah. He speaks to the kingdom of Israel, in the southern portion of the divided kingdom. The general themes of the book of Micah are that God's plan for his people will prevail and that the nations will come to know God through his people Israel, and that his chosen ruler that will be born in Bethlehem. Much like Isaiah, Micah proclaims that Israel's hope will not be in escaping God's judgment, but their hope would be mediated to them through judgment.

In Micah 6, verses one through five, God presents his case against Israel and then, in verses six through eight, our reading for today, we begin to hear what God requires as a proper response to his great love. In verses one through five God presents his case against them as one would in a formal court of law. In verse one the people are called to stand up and face the charges. The mountains and hills and all of creation are then called as God's witnesses. God is implying that what was created at the beginning of time has born witness to the unfaithfulness of the people of God. As the proceedings get under way, God opens with a rhetorical question. In verse three we read, "*O my people, what*



have I done to you"? God is asking this rhetorical question to help the people understand that it was them alone that have broken the relationship. Then, in verses four and five, God reminds them of the saving acts that

he has performed in the past. This brief history lesson would serve to remind the people of God's covenant faithfulness throughout their past.

Turning to verse six, where our passage for today begins, we hear the people's initial response. It too comes in the form of a question. In verse six we read, *"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?"* This too is a rhetorical question. What is offered in verses six and seven comes in ascending order. Calves are offered first and then rams and then rivers of oil. Each proffered item is brought before God with increasing significance. In the courtroom scene that God has laid out in the opening verses of Micah 6, I can picture God silently nodding "no" as each offering is lifted up as a possible way to be spared judgment. Can you picture God silently nodding?



Even when they offer their own firstborn for their transgressions – *"the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul"* – it is not enough for God. The sacrificial system will not suffice. Over the past three weeks we have read from the prophets and have heard their call to a future relationship. It is a future based upon a new divine-human covenant. A firstborn will pay for the sins of the people, but it will be God's firstborn, God's one and only son, Jesus Christ. Offering empty sacrifices – even a firstborn son or daughter – is not drawing the people of Micah's time back into right relationship with God. They are simply going through the motions as prescribed by the law. Their hearts remain hard and far from God and God's ways. God rebukes the offerings of old, the traditions, the going through motions. These are not acceptable to God.

To hear what is acceptable to God, please turn with me to verse eight, where we hear God's response to their question. In this verse we hear what God requires of those who live in right relationship with him. The verse begins with these words: *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good"*. Good? God is the source of all good. What Micah next shares and what we are about to read has to do with the character of God. Here is what the Lord requires of his children: *"to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"*. This sounds very much like the life and teachings of the one who would form the New Testament covenant.



We begin with the first call: *"to do justice"*. Simply put, this means to do what is right. We are called to do



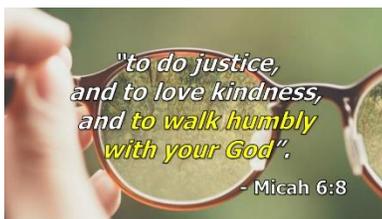
what is right all the time – whether in the public eye and when no one is looking or present. God's order in the world expects us to treat one another in fairness.

That means we do not manipulate one another, that we do not oppress one another, that we do not show favoritism or practice prejudice or stereotyping. We are



next called to *"to love kindness"*. The Hebrew word for

kindness is sometimes translated as "mercy". God's holy character is defined by his passionate, undeserved loyalty. The kindness and mercy of God is one of the



hallmarks of who God is. Through Micah, God calls us to practice these two qualities – mercy and kindness.

Lastly, we are called *"to walk humbly with your God"*.

Humility must characterize God's people. Justice and kindness are incompatible with human arrogance.

God desires for us to live within an ongoing intimate relationship with him that transforms the way we live in relationship with one another. When we practice justice, when we are kind and merciful, when we walk in humility with our God, then God begins to transform us from the inside out. God begins to shape us more and more into his image as we seek to live in right relationship with God and with one another. We no longer live as people struggling to follow rules or to check off what we think are the right boxes. Instead, we begin to see and relate to God and others in ways that flow from the heart, from the place that we connect most deeply to our God.



The transformation of our hearts is a necessary step in our evolving and developing relationship with God. As we experience God's unfolding love more and more, we become better and better conduits of that love. But it is not easy. As I have said many Sundays, our culture and our world challenge us. The culture and our world does not preach a gospel of justice, mercy, kindness, and humility. As we transition to our second passage, from Matthew 5, I invite you to turn your attention to the screens. As you watch this video, I encourage you to notice how many of the words or phrases connect to you and the living out of your faith – or, more precisely, to not living out your faith. Please enjoy this humorous but convicting video.



There are a lot of convicting truths in that video, aren't there? Towards the beginning, when he said, *"We all have at least one big but"* - I think he was being quite generous. And he was right - our buts get in the way of us living out our faith. The biggest but, according to the man was: *"but I don't have enough time"*. That is certainly one of my biggest buts. But - for me, the words with the most impact came towards the end of the video when he talked about the why behind our buts. He made this statement: *"If your but is bigger than your why, your buts too big"*. If our buts for why we do not fully live out our faith are bigger than the why we need to live out our faith, then yes, our buts are too big. They are getting in the way of living out God's unfolding love in the world. Amen?



Now I invite you to turn to Matthew 5 in your Bibles. Here we find our second reading for today. The verses for today are the opening teaching in what is known as "The Sermon on the Mount". Beginning in chapter five and running through chapter seven, Matthew offers an extended teaching from Jesus. The overall theme of this teaching is the call to righteousness. In many ways the Sermon on the Mount mirrors Micah's call that we began with today: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. As we turn to our passage, keep in mind that Jesus is not speaking to the holders of religious power, to the church, but to those who are hurting, broken, and marginalized. In the framework of the sermon series, we must keep in mind the question, is this how the circle grows? Doesn't the unfolding of God's love seek to include more and more of those outside the structure and mindset of those already in the church, already in the circle?

In Matthew 5 we find the paradox of those who are blessed in an unusual way. The paradox is that the blessings comes from troubles in their lives or in the world. This concept ties back into the "almost Christian" ideas that we fleshed out in our latest Advent series. When we are "almost" Christians we are never quite who God calls us to be. We are happy, for example, instead of being content. When we become "altogether" Christians, we find the true peace, hope, love, joy, and so on from walking closely with our God. In the words that we read earlier and in the words that will be on the screens, I chose the "Message" translation. I like the clarity of Eugene Peterson's words for the first twelve verses of Matthew 5, commonly known as the Beatitudes.

The opening two verses of Matthew 5 imply that following Jesus is not and will not be easy. Jesus and his followers were not always popular, were not always accepted. We get this sense at the end of our passage, where Jesus says, *"count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable"*. Many do not want to hear the truths that Jesus brings. Others do not like the light that he shines upon their misdeeds. In verses one and two we read, *"When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions"*. Only those wanting to hear what Jesus had to say and that were willing to put in some effort ascended the hillside with him.

In the heart of our passage, Jesus addressed the blessings and the challenges of walking in right relationship with God. We begin with the challenges that we face or experience at times on our faith journey. The challenges are found in verses three, four, and ten. Here are those verses:

³ "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule".



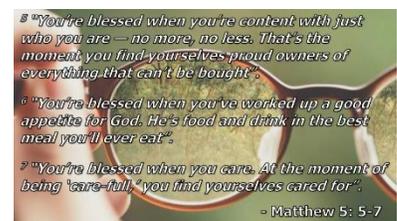
⁴ "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you".

¹⁰ "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom".

When we feel like we have nowhere else to turn, we do rely most deeply on God. When we lose someone or something dear to us, we do open ourselves up the most to God's comfort and presence. When we experience persecution because we have stood for our faith, we do gain more connection to our faith and to our God. The general rule of thumb here is that we grow most in the valleys of life. Part of the message of God's unfolding love is that God's love is always there for us – especially when we need it most. This was the message of the special music that we had today as well. The song Jack and Jo offered reminded us of Jesus' constant presence. Hear again the words from the chorus: *"Give them all, give them all, give them all to Jesus. He will turn your sorrows into joy"*. When we turn over our struggles and challenges to Jesus, he will take them up.

For the blessings, I want to read verses five through nine again, slowly, and to allow just a brief pause for you to reflect on when you have experienced or are perhaps now experiencing these blessings in your life. I encourage you to take a little time this afternoon or in the next day or two to open your Bible at home and to think through these challenges and blessings. This goes above and beyond the GPS questions. Here are verses five through nine:

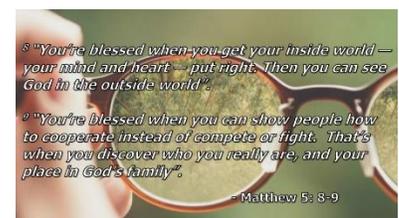
⁵ "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought."



⁶ "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."

⁷ "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for."

⁸ "You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world."



⁹ "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family."



The general message of our passage from Micah 6 and the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5 is one of blessing, one of God's unfolding love. Micah called us to right living as we emulate God's character – seeking to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. A few of the Beatitudes connect into the message of hope found in Micah as well, speaking of the idea that something good will emerge from the dust of something not good. This is not perhaps the path we would choose, but nonetheless, we can entrust ourselves to a God who speaks special promises for the small, the suffering, the shy, the sorrowful – indeed for all of us. The Beatitudes that are blessings speak of the joy and hope we find when we live into the new covenant that we find in Jesus Christ. Both the challenges and blessings are means to live more fully into God's unfolding love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Where are your growing edges in Micah's call – doing justice, loving mercy or kindness, or in walking humbly with God?
- 2) Pray. Are you at the end of your rope or are you lost? Is someone else you know here? Lift it up to God in prayer!
- 3) Serve. From your "good appetite for God" or from your place of being "put right" in your heart and mind, who can serve and share Jesus with?