

Micah 6: 1-8      What God Requires

The eighth verse of the Micah passage I read this morning is often quoted as the answer to a question about what the Lord requires of us. This is a central question about the covenant relationship with God. Today, although as part of our Sacrament of Communion we speak of the new covenant, we don't often think about the covenant as being a relationship in the sense that it was understood in the Hebrew Scriptures. The covenant that God made with the people who became our ancestors in faith was a two-sided contract. Quite correctly we understand that God is sovereign. The covenant and all things which devolve from it begin within God's nature. So we often focus on God's side; on what is offered to and for us. God initiated the contract because that is what a covenant arrangement is. Because of the attributes revealed to us about God through Scripture we know that God constantly reaches out to us. But passages like these we have before us this morning remind us that there are expectation of us—that call throughout for repentance—to change the direction in which we and our culture are moving are statements informing us that there is a way forward for humanity which is God's desire and purpose. The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Micah begins this way: "Hear what the Lord says: 'Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, your mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and your enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.'" It is not unusual for the prophets of Israel to proclaim that the Lord is finding the behaviors and actions of the chosen people to be unacceptable. In this passage and others we have a courtroom trial atmosphere established. Those who are being put on trial are reminded of all of God's acts of redemption—their history is already full of God's saving actions long before the advent of the Son into the world. It is interesting that the response of the people is not a defense or justification for the causes which have caused God to "contend" with them. Instead, they inquire about what the proper offerings might fitting as payment for God's saving acts. In verse 6, the passage seems to convey suggestions about what the people of Israel want to claim as their contribution to the relationship: "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?" These were typical offerings made at the Temple. Verse 7 continues with other options which were also a part of Temple worship: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" and then ironically concludes this verse with the offering never given by the people at the Temple: "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" This is ironic because the Lord never asked for the sacrifice of a child as atonement for sin, but did indeed give his Son to atone for our sin. It seems that the rituals at the Temple were being adhered to during this period. These things were being offered at the altars there. Yet still the Lord is bringing a case against the people because they are not fulfilling the requirements of the covenant. And that brings us to verse 8 which is a clear statement of two things which we need to remember about God's covenant relationship with us as individuals and as a gathered people. "He has told you." This is not something which has been hidden from you but came to you at Mount Sinai. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good." God has given you commandments and ordinance for governing your life—you relationships with God and with each other. When descriptions of God are found giving the attributes of God—hesed or steadfast love is prominent, but so too is the fact that God loves justice and righteousness. "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?" That makes a very concise summary of the expectations which God has for those who repent. As Presbyterians we belong to the Reformed tradition within the Christian faith. One of our theological underpinnings is a firm reliance on scripture as the revealed Word of God. That means that we need to take this portion of the covenant relationship seriously. Another foundational tenet is the understanding that we as human beings are creatures who have rebelled against God in the past, and truthfully are still in rebellion against the lives which God calls us to lead. John Calvin called it humanity's total depravity—the tendency to self love; the tendency to create idols to worship—things in which we place our trust instead of the Lord. Although we as human beings no longer tend to build Temples to Baal, or to the gods of the Roman or Greek pantheon, we do find many things to worship—money, financial security we can obtain for ourselves, power over others, status in society--there are many things in which we place our trust for our well-being and happiness. Each Sunday as part of our worship we acknowledge that and the many ways we fail to live into what God desires for our lives as individuals. Because scripture reveals to us that God desires us to be in relationship with us we know to what lengths God went to provide a pathway for us to "abide in the tent of the Lord." So we rest assured that God's steadfast love will prevail, but there is still that expectation that along with our confession; our petition for forgiveness that we are repentant. There is still an understanding that those things we confess do not conform to God's ways, but to those of the world. This is the balance that our faith journey must find. Self-knowledge that we will not be able to perfectly follow the ways of the Lord as received through scripture so that we must depend upon God's mercy. But God's grace and mercy, gift that it is, also comes with submitting ourselves to living lives of discipleship. That doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly in relationship with God seeking to do God's will are not just nice sounding things to pay lip service to, but actual requirements showing our repentance and desire to abide in God's tent. Psalm 15 lists some very pragmatic suggestions: doing what is right, not slandering, doing no evil nor taking up a reproach against neighbors. The reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians tells us that the "wisdom" of the world is actually foolishness. Verse 28: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world; things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are." Scripture constantly reveals God's concern for the weak, the poor, the lame, the widow, the orphan, and yes, in Deuteronomy specifically called for the chosen people to treat well the alien who resided among them. God's wisdom in Scripture consistently turns the things of the world on its head—those who have been chosen to be God's people are to live to a different standard—a standard which views the world as a place of abundance and thus can freely share; a place where God's love is so powerful that we can forgive as we have been forgiven; a place where we are called to reach out in love and build community so that justice and righteousness prevail and none are oppressed. Those are values that we have claimed for our culture for decades. Those are ideals that formed the basis of my understanding of how my faith calls me to interact with those around me. Those are ideals which I find being threatened today. The Lord Jesus when he ministered on earth went to all those groups of people that were despised, were seen as without value. I wonder how we can claim to be followers of the Way, of his Way, when we no longer are willing to do that but want to withdraw and feel that we are powerful enough on our own to provide for our true needs. If we endorse and participate in those ideas, those

expressions of hatred of the other, those wall building, barrier creating things which separate us from one another, can we claim to belong to the one who came to redeem the world and build up the community so that those who followed him would be recognized by the love they have for one another and their ability to forgive—including those who were enemies. The world around is proclaiming the teachings of Christ to be either total foolishness or to somehow belong just to their own group. If we read the Word as revealed to us from Genesis through Exodus and the wilderness journey including the Hebrew prophets, God expresses concern for the weak and vulnerable throughout the culture. In a sermon entitled Christianity 101 Michael L. Lindvall of the Brick Church in New York City began it with a joke about reducing all the wisdom of the world for an Emperor into a short form that he could easily read and thus become wise. The first attempt took 10 years and produced 10 volumes. The Emperor was aghast at this and sent them back to condense it further. Five years later they came back with a single volume. This was again determined to be too long. This again did not satisfy the Emperor who asked for further condensation. This time the wisdom of the world was presented as a single 500 word page. The Emperor requested that they reduce that to a single sentence. Various versions have different sentences as containing all the wisdom of the world, but the sentence is usually ironic or cynical. For myself, I think all the wisdom I need is an understanding of two very short sentences. The first is God loves me. I don't deserve it. I can't earn it. It's a gift that is truly free. When Jesus was asked what are the greatest commandments his reply can be condensed into two brief statements: Love God. Love others. Throughout Scripture there are no fewer than seven "Christianity 101" summaries of the faith. Each one is shaped differently. Each employs a distinct language. Each makes use of a different rhetoric, but they all have one thing in common. One thread runs through them all. Everyone of them is about how you treat other human beings. Mercy to others is not an elective. Justice is not incidental. Compassion is not optional. Love is the core of the faith. It is in this loving others that we find Micah's condensation of what loving others looks like. "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? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.