

Micah 6:1-8

¹Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

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? ⁷Will 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?” ⁸He 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?

This passage contains the most famous half verse I know of, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Its focal point is justice. And that makes me uncomfortable. When we talk about Biblical Justice, I stand accused. It means I must confront my white male privilege in a society that doesn't really acknowledge that such a thing exists. And I don't want to acknowledge that I have it. Except for age and a temporary minor disability, I am the bastion of privilege. I can look back at my life and see that I got where I am, not only because of my abilities, but also at the expense of others. The deck was stacked in my favor as a white male. And while I did not use that intentionally to gain an advantage over others, I think that I did have an advantage.

It is almost as if I was singing “All for the Best” from Godspell with the killer line, “Someone's got to be oppressed.”

The passage begins as a courtroom scene. All of creation is called on to settle the dispute. It is foundational for the Hebrew people and their understanding of God. Notice that God doesn't bring any charges against the people of Israel. There is no “You did this” and no “No we didn't” in response. Rather, God tells the story of all that has been done for them. They were liberated from slavery and not abandoned; rather leaders were provided and help given every step of the way until they arrived in the Promised Land. “So why have you abandoned me?” God asks. The Hebrew people don't defend themselves or deny the question. Instead they ask, “So God, what do you want?”

Micah, this eighth century BCE prophet, is not writing during one of the times of apostasy. His prophecies are during the time of Hezekiah, a reformer. Scripture in 2 Kings 18: 5 says this about him: “He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among them that were before him.” Hezekiah repaired the temple; he centralized the worship there. He also had sources of idolatrous worship destroyed. He was a zealous reformer.

So this prophecy is not taking place in a time of abandoning the faith, but during a time of religious revival. Hezekiah is seeking to save Judah, the southern kingdom, from the same plight that fell to Israel, the northern kingdom: decimation by the Assyrians under Sargon.

He tried to do what he could. And this court case reflects much of the tone his reforms had set. When the people reply to God, they ask, “What is it you want? How do you want us to worship you?” And with a little bit of exasperation, “What more do you want? Name it and we will do it.”

I don’t know if they are speaking in hyperbole and perhaps a bit of sarcasm, or with dead seriousness but the people ask “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, a whole ram, rare for a subsistence economy with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams more than a king’s horde, 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?” These are monumental gifts, even child sacrifice that some kings seemed to have practiced to appease God.

God, what kind of sacrifice do you want? And the reply is somewhat surprising there is nothing about worship or sacrifice. The prophet seems to say, “Your worship is fine. I don’t need any more sacrifices. And then the clincher, I want one more thing in response for what I have done. I want you to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

In this we hear the double emphasis on loving God and loving neighbor. It foreshadows Jesus’ teaching: “O is that all?”

Before I get into these three things in specific, we need to realize these are not one-time events, but lifetime activities done in response to God’s love for us. God performed the saving act for Israel before they did anything, just like us. God claims us out of pure grace. God comes to us in relationship because that is God’s nature. What Micah is calling for is a life lived in response to God’s loving gifts. And proper worship is not enough. Not then, not now. More than a single deed is expected. A way of life is called for.

I am going to save justice for last, because I think it is the focal point of the passage. In addition to doing justice we are called on to “embrace faithful love,” as the Common English Bible puts it.

Faithful love, God’s basic way of looking at us. Throughout scripture this is how God loves us. I like this, because it includes action and attitude. I like the notion to love with a faithful covenantal love. It is the kind of love God has for us and we are called to have for each other. It is how we regard each other **and** how we act toward each other. I often think of marriage between two people as a basic form of faithful love. Two folks pledge to love each other and to want, work for and will what is best for the other. I also see this type of love as the heart of prayer. In faithful loving prayer we seek that which is best for the other because that is what God does for us. Why did God liberate Israel? Why does God grant us new life? Because loves us.

And walk deliberately with your god is the best of the translations. I think it refers again to attitude and action. We are not called to just la ti da through life; we are to cultivate a God consciousness. We are to trust that God is with us at each juncture. Would our day look any different if we had that sense of God with us at all times? Would it be any different? And this I think is very difficult, for all too often we find ourselves drifting along forgetting God. Then we slip into justifying things by our preferences rather than God’s will.

It is the way we gloss over something that we know is wrong with “What did it hurt?” We excuse ourselves rather than confess that we were wrong. I know this is hard for me. I try to do it but I sometimes fail living my whole day conscious of God, but that is why I urge us to start our day off with prayer and devotions. It orients our whole day.

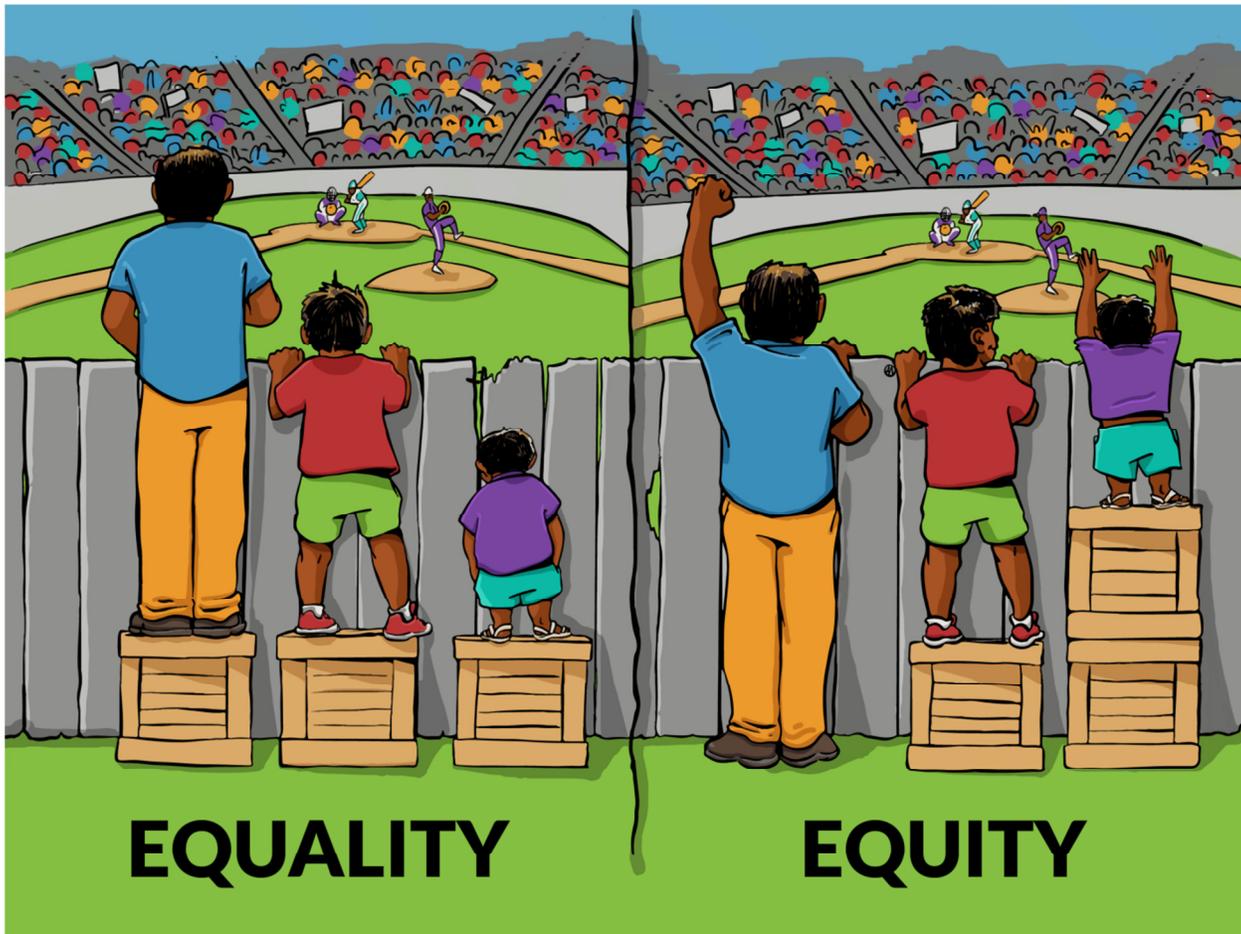
And finally, we are to do justice, or to act justly. This is the heart of the prophetic message. While the prophets will often denounce false worship, their greatest incitement is held for those who take advantage of the vulnerable in society and those who neglect the hurting, as scripture calls them, the widows, orphans, and aliens.

Justice is something we do. Wanting it is not enough. We must work for justice. What is justice? It is equity and fairness, particularly for those who are weak and powerless. Seeking justice for others living justly is often controversial, because it often deals with the issue of privilege. I think Benjamin Franklin stated it well. "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."

And therein is the rub; if it doesn't affect me adversely, I don't notice it. I usually have to have a situation brought to my attention to care and when it is not about me, I want to dismiss it.

I seem to be bombarded lately by issues of white privilege, and I am having to come to grips with it. Recently it came from four directions. One is *Small Great Things*, a book by Jodi Picoult. It is our church book club selection and a selection for my book club in Saint Louis. It focuses on a white public defender, a black nurse client, and a white supremacist. It is one of the better books I have experienced in a long time. Another book is called *Injustice and the Care of Souls*, which calls upon pastors to be aware of all the dynamics of their own privilege and setting in life. It reminds us to be sensitive to the different races, cultures, orientations, ethnicities, abilities and other differences that we come in contact with. A third is *The End of White Christian America* by Robert Jones. It is an analysis of statistics and trends of Christianity in our country. It makes interesting reading while not telling us much we didn't already know. And finally, Jim Wallis mentions "The Talk" in his book *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*. You know "The Talk"; the one black parents have with their kids that white parents don't have to have. It is about how to behave if stopped by the police. Keep your hands in sight, no sudden moves, and the like. White parents don't have to explain to their kids how to be safe around the police. He talks of this not in an anti-police way, but to give people insight into what it means to be an African-American parent and the fear they have for the safety of their children.

When I was growing up, we had separate but equal schools. Except for one thing - they weren't. Now it is not so much black and white, but that is still there. Rather it is poor districts vs rich ones. The schools are just not the same. There is no equity. And justice is equity-based. **Equity** means trying to understand and help people achieve *what they need* to enjoy full, healthy lives. **Equality**, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy full, healthy lives. Like equity, **equality** aims to promote fairness and justice, but equality can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs *the same things*, which they don't. Poverty creates its own set of problems, which makes education a more daunting task, especially in poorer communities. Equality would mean each district gets the same and equity means each gets what it needs to do the job entrusted to it.



There is a wonderful cartoon that shows three boys at an outfield fence trying to watch a baseball game. They each are standing on a box of the same size. One can see over the wall well, while one barely sees over, and one not at all. That is equality; everyone gets the same box. In a picture next to it are the same boys, one seeing over the fence, the second boy gets one box and the third child gets two, and all can now see just fine.

Justice is not about sacrificing a thousand rams but performing acts of equity to make sure people have what they need, not just giving them the exact same thing. Working for justice is working for equity.

And that is what God calls us to do: To do just, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.