

Imagine yourself, if you will, standing at the judgment seat of God. Yes, I know, that's something we'd rather not do until we absolutely have to, but go along with me. Let's envision that God's seat of judgment is within a courtroom, where the floors and walls, the benches and tables and seats, are all made of fine marble. It's beautiful to look at, but the room is cold, unwelcoming. Every sound bounces from one wall to another, a pencil dropped, the scrape of a chair being moved. God is seated on the throne, "high and lifted up," as Isaiah describes. Standing before God are two people: the Prophet Micah, whose role is to argue God's case—to act as the prosecutor. And you are the other person, the defendant, who will plead your case alone. No excuses you can make will help you now; God knows you just as well as you know yourself; maybe better.

Although today's passage from Micah doesn't mention a courtroom, we've seen enough episodes of *Law and Order* to envision how this interrogation could take place in one, beginning with Micah's words: "plead your case." Micah was not a lawyer, at least not as we know them in our time. Along with Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, Micah was an eighth century prophet. The prophet's function is to expose the reality of whatever is causing a separation between God and God's people. Micah and the other prophets were called by God specifically to expose social injustices and unethical actions that contradicted God's teachings to Israel and God's expectations for these chosen people. Through the tone of God's questions, we know that God is displeased, even sad. "O my people, what have I done to you?" God's words bear a hint of compassion and regret as he pleads with Israel in the way a parent pleads with a wayward child who has ignored all the good he's been given, including the love.

In return, Israel answers God's question, much like a defensive teenager would answer a parent who won't get off her back. Weren't all those things I did enough for you? God replies, through Micah, in words that are simple yet profound; so profound that they've come to be known as the "Golden Text of the Old Testament." We've heard them before and they come back to nag us. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It's more a command than a question. Here's what to do if you want to please me, God says. And we're not let off the hook just because we live in a different time and call ourselves followers of Christ. If anything, this makes the command even stronger because this is also what Jesus teaches us.

What exactly is Micah talking about when he names justice, kindness, and humility? Brett Younger, a theology professor makes it simple: "God wants us to do justice—to be a voice for oppressed persons, unprotected persons, widows, and foreigners, and to fight for the rights of handicapped persons, minorities, elderly persons, poor persons and every person treated as less than God's child. God wants us to love kindness...responding to God's love by sharing it with others...to walk humbly with God by "listening for God's voice wherever God may be heard ...thoughtfully examining what it means to live with faith." It's a tall order, and it's directed at us as surely as it's directed at the Israelites. The time for excuses and pretenses is past. We must examine how our words and our actions connect, consider how the words we say and the beliefs we express in church on Sunday go with us into the world. Are we walking the walk or just talking the talk? Just as God wanted more than shallow sacrifices and outright disobedience from the Israelites, God certainly wants more from us than lip service.

Here in Rutherfordton, and in the other towns and communities of our county, we're surrounded by overwhelming needs—the needs of families whose life circumstances are far less comfortable than our own, who often are being forced to raise their children in ways we consider deplorable and neglectful, and who have little or no chance to change any of it. I've spoken of this to you many, many times. With some of you, I've caught a glimpse of these needs at Welcome Table when we're there once a month. I've also seen need, despair, and even guilt in the faces of mothers who don't

have the money to feed their children or to pay the utility bills so they can keep heat on in the house. What they *do* have is a pretty sure bet that next month won't be any better.

This week I've seen up close the faces of children who are unsupervised, left to fend for themselves, making terrible decisions about how to spend their time, and who are setting themselves up, not to be the recipients of the social justice God calls us to seek, but of the legal justice of our court system. I'm speaking about the young teenagers who vandalized our property this past week. As aggravated and frustrated as I've been about what they did, I can see very clearly that they need attention and supervision, and to know that someone cares for them. They're not getting it from their parents.

When we see situations like this one, or encounter folks repeated over time who either seem uninterested in changing their circumstances or cannot find the way to make the changes, it can be hard to keep cynicism and judgment at bay. But God doesn't call us to be cynical or judgmental and God certainly doesn't call us to be stingy. God calls us—requires us—to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. These are the offerings and sacrifices we make to and for God. And somehow, I think God is looking for a bigger sacrifice than a box of spaghetti put into a basket on Sunday morning or serving a meal once a month! The needs of families for food and other basic needs in life, and the teenagers' needs for mentoring and encouragement affect our own lives in a myriad of ways. They're just down the street and around the corner. We can't turn a blind eye to them. Today we'll be praying for those boys, and I ask you to also pray for God to guide us to minister to them in a kind and substantial way. They are the neighbors God calls us to love.

It's surely no coincidence that the lectionary pairs this Golden Text from the Old Testament with Matthew's Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. Micah speaks of being in right relationship with God. In the Beatitudes, the word "blessed" describes being in favor with God. Micah's text tells us what God requires now. The Beatitudes also reflect a present reality, but imply a future reward as well. Unlike Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Matthew doesn't include the woes that accompany the blessings—we'll hear about them later this year. We're missing the comparison of blessings and woes that reinforce what they really mean and how they apply to us.

Here's the unwelcome news: while we may convince ourselves that those blessings are about us because we acknowledge the needs of others by sending a check to a charity or dropping a box of spaghetti into a basket on Sunday, they are not about us—not yet, at least. It's so easy to convince ourselves that the standards Jesus sets for us are easily resolved with money or are to be done by someone else. Or that they are so hard we can never accomplish them. We excuse ourselves because we attend church, read our bibles and say our prayers, or we blame our busy lives, or work, or even our age for keeping us from doing what we know Jesus is calling us to do. Yet, when we look around we see that the hungry still need to be fed, the poor still need shelter and clothing, and neglected children still need love. Those who are blessed are the ones who understand that our response to those in need not only improves their lives, but ours as well. When we finally get up and actually do what Jesus calls us to do, we'll surely realize that's the best possible way to share the love of God with others. Until then, it will be hard for us to really know what it means to be blessed or to walk humbly with God.

A brother posed a question to one of the elders, saying: "There are two brothers, of whom one remains praying in his cell, fasting six days at a time and doing a great deal of penance. The other one takes care of the sick. Which one's work is most pleasing to God?" The elder replied: "If that brother who fasts six days at a time were to hang himself up by the nose, he would not equal the one who takes care of the sick."

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? As Paul said to the Corinthians, I say to you, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters." Consider your own call. Amen.