

# WALKING WITH GOD

## Psalm 15

## Micah 6: 1-8

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Directly inside the main doors of the church I used to serve, positioned so everyone entering the building can see it, hangs a quilted banner with the words of Micah 6:8 on it: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” My former church loves banners the way we do timelines, and has a number of them adorning the church. There are banners commemorating special events, honoring mission partnerships, and celebrating the liturgical seasons – most of them hand-made by members of the congregation and imbued with special meaning because of what they represent in the life and ministry of the congregation.

It is the Micah banner though that holds that specific place of prominence, likely because the pastor emeritus, who served there for 30 years, had made it kind of a theme verse for the church. His passion for social action, and concern for those Jesus referred to as “the least of these,” made it easy to understand why this is an important verse for him. Truth be told, it is an important verse for all of us. I can’t think of anywhere else in Scripture that lays out so convincingly and poetically what faithful living is supposed to look like. The question then, is just how do we fulfill the requirement of God “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God”?

It was less than two years ago, on April 26, 2018, that the National Memorial for Peace and Justice first opened to the public. It is the nation’s first memorial dedicated

“to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.” One of the most solemn displays at the memorial is a series of jars filled with dirt that had been dug from sites where some of the 4400 documented lynchings of African American men, women, and children between 1877 and 1950 are known to have occurred. Bryan Stevenson, an author and widely acclaimed public interest lawyer, founded the Memorial and the Equal Justice Initiative which supports it. He recently shared in an interview the story of an African American woman who helped visit the lynching sites and collect dirt for this project.

She was digging on her hands and knees and placing dirt in a jar at one of these sites when a white man driving by in a truck slowed down to look at her. He drove past, turned around and then stopped. He rolled down the window to ask her what she was doing. She said she felt compelled to tell him the truth, despite her fear. After listening to her, the man got out of the truck, approached her, and asked if he could help. She offered him the trowel, but he declined and began to dig with his hands. Together they put the dirt in the jar.

She noticed tears streaming down his face and asked if he was OK. He responded and said to her that he feared his ancestors may have participated in the very lynching she was memorializing. They cried together. They took pictures of each other, holding the jar, memorializing a most unexpected moment. And then I assume (because that’s where the interview ended) they went their separate ways.

The power of this story, I think – and it’s hard not to be moved by it – is the way in which we see two people connecting; people with such obviously divergent

backgrounds. We recognize the courage it took for each of them to come together – to in essence tell the truth to one another. The woman, of what she was doing; and the man of his knowledge about his family history. We know how uncommon an encounter like this can be, and yet, I think, many of us long for it – for greater understanding, acceptance, and connection to people with different backgrounds and life experiences. Somewhere deep inside, we know that longing, by itself, is not enough. That is why we love these stories; because they remind us of what is possible – that we can connect, that we can be honest, and we can accept and be accepted by one another.

But Micah did not say to love justice, and God does not call us merely to be moved by stories like this. What the Lord requires of us is to Do Justice. That is an entirely different story, one in which we become protagonists, undoing in big and small ways, the systemic injustices within our society that degrade, and marginalize, and impoverish people of color, people of lesser means, people whose lifestyles have been judged as deviant, unnatural, abhorrent to God. Unravelling racism and intolerance are acts of justice. Loving justice – which I suppose is the first step, is merely that. God calls us to do justice; a far more difficult thing.

What God calls us to love is kindness. We might think that this is the thing God would want us to do. Show kindness; treat others the way you want to be treated. God does want those things, as far as I know, but that is not the point Micah is trying to get across here. “Kindness” in this context is not synonymous with niceness, but with mercy, and in relation to God, steadfast love, as it is translated in Psalm 86:5: “For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.” The essence here is God’s mercy toward undeserving people; God’s enduring faithfulness even when people are unfaithful in return.

We know of at least one Old Testament prophet who struggled mightily to accept this. Jonah, as the story goes, was called upon to go to the city of Nineveh, known for its wickedness, to warn them of God's impending judgment and call them to repentance. Jonah instead boarded a ship Tarshish, in the opposite direction. That's when he gets tossed into the sea, swallowed by a great fish, and unceremoniously dumped on Nineveh's shores. The Ninevites were sworn enemies, and Jonah wanted nothing to do with them, but realizing he has no other choice, Jonah did as God had instructed. The Ninevites listened to his word and repented, saying to themselves, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." God relented, the city was spared, and Jonah was hopping mad. "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Jonah wanted to Ninevites to get what they deserved, and in his opinion, it was certainly not God's mercy and grace.

There is a little of Jonah in each of us, I suspect. Each of us has a few – maybe more than a few – Ninevites in our lives – the tormenting bully, the demeaning boss, the self-righteous relative, and all those people on the other side of the political aisle. We have a lot of feelings about them; a lot of interest in what they might experience, but God's mercy and steadfast love are probably not very high on the list. Loving justice is easy, for it is about people getting what has been denied them. But we're called to love kindness, in the form of mercy, which is about people being spared what they "deserve" – that's a lot harder. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God – that is what the Lord requires.

Let me a bit more at this point about that word “require.” Reverend James Howell says that our English translation misses the heart of the passage’s meaning, because it calls to mind “notions of rules or grading,” he says, “as in ‘the teacher requires you turn in a three-page paper by Friday.’” The verb in Hebrew is darash, which “has undertones of affection, or the healthiest sort of dependency, as in “the child requires his mother’s love,” or “the flower requires rain and sunshine.” There is a mood of seeking in darash; lovers seek each other out, and a shepherd seeks his lost sheep—and in the Old Testament, both situations use darash. So when the Lord “requires” justice, kindness and mercy,” Howell says, “it isn’t that the Lord ‘insists on’ or ‘demands’ these things. God seeks them, yearns for them, and frankly needs them from us as intimate partners in God’s [work in the world].” Doing justice, loving kindness – or mercy – and walking humbly with your God.

Last week, while researching possible topics for an upcoming Faith Forward TED Talk, I ran across a presentation by author and poet David Whyte. He was sharing about a conversation with his niece, who at the age of 23, having recently graduated from college, had completed a 500 mile, seven-week pilgrimage along the famous Camino de Santiago de Compostela. She had walked it, she told him, to give herself some courage and prepare for what was coming next in life. He asked her about the most powerful moment on the journey, of which she said she had many. But the most powerful moment was during the camino itself, but three days further on, at a place called Finesterre, which in Latin means “the end of the earth,” a cliff’s edge where the ground turns to ocean on the western coast of Spain.

“It was really incredible,” she said. “The sun was going down, but the full moon was coming up behind me. And the full moon was illuminated by the dying sun in such a

powerful way that even after the sun had dropped below the horizon, the moon could still see that sun, and I had a moon shadow. And I was looking at my moon shadow walking across the Atlantic, across this ocean. And I thought, oh that's my new self, going into the future. But suddenly I realized the sun was falling further, the moon was losing its reflection, my shadow was disappearing. The most powerful moment I had on the whole camino when I realized that I myself had to walk across that unknown sea into my future."

Walking with God is simply this: living in continual awareness that from the earliest days of our life pilgrimage, in the and in the moments of reckoning, when we are doing the work of justice, or contemplating the paths of our moonshadows, to our final breath of this life and passage into the next, we are in the presence of the Almighty, the one who created us, who calls us, who showers us with steadfast love. We are never alone. God is with us every step of the way. Amen.