

WHAT IS REQUIRED?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Micah 6: 6-9 (NRSV)

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 of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 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?

I offer this sermon to all of the religious perspectives, and non-religious perspectives, that are represented in this congregation. I think we sometimes forget that within the membership of University Congregational Church there are people who consider themselves progressive or liberal Christians, some who think of themselves as moderate or traditionalists; others who might even be identified as conservative Christians. And did you know that we have members who self-identify as agnostics or atheists? That is fine. I recall the words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "There is more faith in the world of doubt than all the creeds combined." I will bet that the largest group of members simply are not sure where they are on the Christian faith spectrum. Despite the fact that some will say, "Gary, we're all just a bunch of "liberals," or "humanists," we are not. And that is OK. That is why they call us

“Congregationalists.” I just hope that you might appreciate the challenge, or what bishops used to call “an opportunity,” of creating a sermon that covers as much of the spectrum as possible.

My message this morning is inspired by the prophet, Micah. It is a message for the New Year. It does not matter whether you take the Bible literally or metaphorically; whether you are a fundamentalist or a radical; whether you are neo-orthodox or liberal. Micah’s message sweeps across the entire religious perspective and his words are not confined to Christians, Jews, Muslims or any other religion of the world. The message is not concerned with religious doctrine but human ethics. It is a message that is delivered to the entire nation. And as this nation prepares to inaugurate a new president I think it is important that we hear the counsel that Micah would offer to us.

Micah was a prophet of the eighth century before the Common Era. The Jews were divided into the nations of Israel and Judah. The centers of power were, respectively, Samaria and Jerusalem. The Assyrians threatened both. In time the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, would conquer them both. What was it that weakened the Jews against the Assyrians? Micah placed responsibility for the failure of the nation on corrupt

political officials, dishonorable religious leaders, and crooked businessmen and wealthy citizens who cheated the poor.

Of the politicians, Micah said, “Should you not know justice? You who hate the good, and love the evil; who tear the skin of my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, they break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron. (3: 1b – 3) That is to say, the policies of the rulers and governors were stripping away the livelihoods of the citizens. They gained personal and political fortune on the backs of the common people with total disregard for justice. Social policies and the political process favored the powerful at the expense of the laboring classes.

The preachers, priests, and prophets were not much better than the politicians. “Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.” (3:5) In other words, the ministers did not preach with integrity. They offered up what they thought the people wanted to hear in order to enrich the offering and their personal income.

What is more, the priests and politicians were in league with one another. Said Micah, they “abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, ‘Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.’ Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field.” (3: 9-12a)

In those days religious leaders often settled legal issues that dealt with property, kosher laws, and divorce. Micah charged in the second chapter that the nation’s religious and political leaders had coveted and seized fields and houses, oppressing the householders and their families by denying their inheritance. Micah charged the politicians and clergy with bribery and fraud. The courts had been corrupted to favor those who could afford to buy a verdict or office. Through all of this the ministers droned words of false harmony and the promise that God was on their side.

Of the business leaders Micah charged, “Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths.” (6:11)

The meaning is obvious. Weights and measures were fraudulent.

Violence in business practices typically meant usury, brutal foreclosure laws that stripped families of home, business, and property. Business lies could mean anything from false advertising, bait and switch customs, and dishonest accounting practices. You can extend Micah's condemnation to ponzi schemes, high-risk mortgages, junk bonds, usurious bank and credit card charges, and so on.

The combination of corruption in temple, state, and business set the nation up for conquest. It would only be a matter of time before the moral erosion of national leadership would destroy the nation. Micah called it the judgment of God. You might prefer to call it bad karma or natural consequences. Every nation erodes and dissolves when her leaders are corrupt and the people are oppressed.

You might be tempted to think that this is just the ranting of some Old Testament preacher bringing hell-fire damnation on the country. But I am wondering if we might consider the idea that moral integrity is absolutely essential to the wellbeing of any community or nation. It finally does not matter who is inaugurated as President of the United States on January 20th if that person is not a man or woman of ethical fortitude. Barack Obama does not stand alone in the oath of office. The

nation's future depends on the moral fabric of its political, religious, and business leaders.

Let us be clear that for Micah the heart of moral agency was the just relationships between the common citizen, the state, commerce, and religious centers. Are people being treaty fairly and honestly or are they being cheated or taken advantage of? Do people gain wealth or power at the expense or disadvantage of others? Are people oppressed because of political, business, or religious practices? What political party or religious institutions you belong to are not the most important questions. Your line of work or business is of little importance as long as people do not suffer by your policies and practices.

This is a fundamental truth that runs through every major religion of the world. The Buddhist sutra, *Anguttara Nikaya*, declares:

“If the bull goes straight when the herd is crossing the road, they will all go straight, because he leads the way. The same among people. If the one who's thought to be the highest lives in goodness, the others do so too. The whole realm lives happily if the ruler lives rightly.”¹

Lao Tsu asked:

“Why are the people starving?
Because the rulers eat up the money in taxes.
Therefore the people are starving.

¹ Anguttara Nikaya, *The Buddha Speaks*, edited by Anne Bancroft (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 121.

Why are the people rebellious?
 Because the rulers interfere too much.
 Therefore they are rebellious.”²

And I think it is helpful to be reminded that Islam began when a businessman by the name of Muhammad grew distressed at the downward moral spiral of his beloved Arabia. Even in his own tribe, the Quarysh, he saw the tribal laws and customs of generosity for the poor eroding into selfish, even abusive, practices. Through several years of meditation and revelation Muhammad began to conceive of a new relationship between the sacred and the people. Karen Armstrong wrote:

“The new sect would eventually be called *Islam* (surrender); a *Muslim* was a man or a woman who had made this submission of their entire being to Allah and his demand that human beings behave to one another with justice, equity, and compassion.”³

Muslims are required to give a regular portion of their income to the poor and they fast during Ramadan to be reminded that impoverished men, women, and children often go hungry.

What then is required of us if we are to secure the nation and move it into a new future? Micah’s answer to that question is “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” It does not

² Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Random House, 1972), Chapter 75.

³ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 5.

matter if we are from Samaria, or Jerusalem, or Mecca, or Rome. We can do justice, love kindness, and be humble in our religious practice. We may worship on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. But the bigger question is whether we are just in our relationships with everyone else. We may or may not eat pork, but are we kind with all those who cross our path? We may pray on a kneeler, a zafu, or a mat but the essential religious challenge is our humility before God. We may pray with rosaries, malas, or phylacteries, but the real test of our faith is the justice we do on behalf of the oppressed. Micah goes so far as to say that prayer, ritual, and sacrifice mean nothing if we are not women and men of justice, kindness, and humility. There is no religious practice that can substitute for right relationships, compassion, and self-denial.

Where the issues of justice, kindness, and humility become problematic for us is in the arenas of politics, religion, and business. Justice, kindness, and humility are not confined to the Sunday school classroom. Micah seeks justice in the statehouse, the congregation, and the family business. Micah seeks kindness in the courthouse, the church, and the corporation. Micah seeks humility in the office of the President of the United States, the mosque, and the stock exchange. They are dead terms if they have no relevance for how we govern, inspire, and earn our

living. Micah expects politicians, clergy, and businesswomen and men to measure their work against the plumb line of justice, mercy, and humility.

Every person who holds public office is held to the ultimate standards of justice, mercy, and humility. They are not finally held to the standards of pollsters, or the party platform, or their political ideology. Every minister in every local church, synagogue, mosque, or temple is held to the same standards of justice, mercy, and humble service. They are not finally held to doctrine, ritual, or creed. Every store clerk, financial advisor, and corporate executive is held to the standards of justice, kindness, and humility before their God. They are not ultimately held to profit margins, corporate culture, or company loyalty. Justice, kindness, and humbleness with one's God must be kneaded into the dough of our everyday lives. They are meant to be in the trenches and ditches of our work-a-day world.

It is my conviction that our churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are strongest when we adhere to the prophetic witness of Micah. We are weakest when we are silent on the issues of justice in our effort to promote national, ethnic, or religious identity. We are weakest when we sacrifice mercy and kindness for revenge, punishment, or self-justification. We are weakest when the humble walk with our God

becomes a race for religious domination, favor with politicians, or name recognition in market surveys. We are strongest when we reach across our religious affiliations to serve the cause of justice, mercy, and humility.

I believe that these will be the key ingredients to a successful term of office for President Elect Obama. I believe that justice, mercy, and humility must serve every policy decision, domestic and foreign if we are to secure the future of the nation. I believe that these same qualities will shape the future of this congregation. Justice, mercy, and humility will be the foundation of commerce and wealth for anyone who truly seeks the richness of life.

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