



“The Truest Stewardship”

Text: Micah 1:3-5; 5:3-2a; 6:6-8

a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Of all the passages from the prophets that you might be able to remember, these snippets from Micah, which serve as the heart of our morning's worship, are probably among the most memorable. “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” It almost makes you think we should be surrounded by pines boughs and Advent candles and sing a chorus of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” We're accustomed to those words being spoken during the Advent season which, by the way, begins three Sundays from now.

For those of us raised in the church of the 1960s and 70s, all you have to do is ask the question, “What does the Lord require of you?” and the answer comes right back, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah is no stranger to us. We know Micah. Well, at least we know some of Micah's words.

And, of course, it's Stewardship Sunday, that day in the church year when we make our financial commitments for the next year of ministry and mission. It may seem a strange practice to some, but it is the best way for us to faithfully plan for and oversee the work God is calling us to do and the resources God is giving us to do it.

Now, as your preacher, I know that the only thing that Presbyterians hate to talk about less than Evangelism is Stewardship and money. So, I'm not going to talk about money, other than to say that there is no question that the clear teaching of the Bible is that we are to give as we have received - that to those who have received much, much will be expected - that gratitude and thanksgiving are at the heart of authentic giving - and that there is more joy in giving than you may have been led to believe. I will also say that if somewhere in the course of the morning's service the Spirit should move you to revisit your anticipated pledge and increase it, you should pay attention to the promptings of the Spirit. The work of God requires money, we have it, we need to share it. That's all I'm going to say about money.

But, that's not all I'm going to say about stewardship. Stewardship is about what we do with what has been entrusted to us. It's the "how" and "what" and "why" of giving and not the "how much."

And it is the Prophet Micah who gives it to us in such clear and unmistakable terms that we cannot fail to hear the message from God. Micah is speaking to us of the truest stewardship.

The prophet begins with a simple question: "what does the Lord require of you?" What does God expect of you? What must you do to please God? What must you offer to keep on God's good side?

Those questions have been answered in some pretty interesting ways throughout the history of God's people. The salvation sales force on religious media have made it pretty clear that if you sow your seed into their ministry you will reap a harvest of plenty. Prosperity, you see, is only one significant offering away. Or, if you agree to send \$50 a month, you can join the "Archangel Society" and receive a nice piece of kitsch to put on your coffee table to tell everyone who enters your home that you are a religious booster of whichever of the brethren and sisters you're watching. The only trouble, of course, is that it completely decimates the idea of grace. God will only bless you if you bless God's appointed recipient. God operates on a system of quid pro quo. "Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"

There have been some who thought that the way to please God and curry God's favor was to sacrifice a relative. With Thanksgiving gatherings on the horizon, this system may seem to contain some wisdom. Mark Twain tells of visiting an ancient temple In Hawaii, where human sacrifice was offered so that sins could be forgiven, "a place where human sacrifices were offered up in those old bygone days when the simple child of Nature, yielding momentarily to sin when sorely tempted, acknowledged his error after calm reflection, and came forward with noble frankness and offered up his grandmother as an atoning sacrifice - in those old days when the luckless sinner could keep on cleansing his conscience and achieving periodical happiness as long as his relations

held out.” More seriously, the sacrifice of children was actually being done at the time of Micah by other cultures that surrounded Judah. Shall I offer the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

What does the Lord require of us? What is the nature of the relationship between us and God? What does it mean to be God’s people.

You know the answer: “do justice...to love kindness...to walk humble (or modestly) with your God.” It sounds simple, doesn’t it? It seems almost too simple, too easy, too elementary.

Rabbi Simlai was a 3rd century rabbi in Palestine. It was Simlai who taught that there were 613 commandments, or mitzvot. He calculated that there were 365 negative precepts - “thou shalt nots.” But, of Micah, he said that Micah reduced the commandments down to three fundamental principles: do justice...offer acts of kindness...and to walk humbly with your God, which at the time meant taking part in wedding and funeral processions.

I submit to you, my sisters and brothers, that these three are the truest forms of stewardship. These are the pathways to deepened connection with God. This is the life Jesus came to show us.

“Do justice.” Not only are we called to do what is right and just and honest and moral and true, we are called to expect that of others - and especially those who would lead us. Do not forget that Micah is speaking, not only to the everyday people, but to kings and courtiers. Justice is the right of every person. Martin Luther King told us: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.” Pope Francis teaches: “We are all equal - all of us - but this truth is not recognized, this equality is not recognized, and for this reason some people are, we can say, happier than others. But this is not a right! We all have the same rights. When we do not see this, society is unjust. It does not follow the rule of justice, and where there is no justice, there cannot be peace. I would like to repeat this with you: where there is no justice, there is no peace!” The gift of peace and wholeness is grounded in justice.

“Love kindness.” The translation is tricky, but the intention is to put kindness into action. Goodness must find avenues of expression. The way of God must be enfleshed and made visible. Another rabbi, a couple of centuries before Simlai, a fellow named Jesus, said, “..I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Those who were called righteous said, “When was that? We never saw you in any such condition.” And Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When justice becomes our aim, we will change the way we treat each other and offer each other expressions of kindness and love that are incarnations of God’s limitless love.

“And walk humbly with your God.” Here is the very heart of Micah’s message. God opens the door to a relationship with humankind. God makes the first move toward us. God invites us into a life-altering, life-sustaining relationship - a relationship grounded in justice, acts of kindness (love in action), which makes possible the walk with God for which we yearn. This image of justice, kindness, and connection is the very embodiment of what it means to be God’s people and in relationship with God.

Those who find it easy to take unfair advantage of others, oppress others, enshrine prejudice into laws, and make themselves strong at the expense of the poor and powerless, will never understand Micah or the life to which we call us. It will simply make no sense. They are their own god and they will do as they please.

But, if you would live the life God created you to have, if you would be happy and at peace, if you would know joy and contentment, if you would experience gratitude and thanksgiving for yourself, Micah gives you the way.

“Do justice...practice kindness...walk humbly with your God.” This is the truest stewardship and it is the way to the abundant life God offers - for now and evermore. Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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