

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
February 1, 2026
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Psalm 15; Micah 6:1-8

"What the Lord Requires"

Have you ever been confused? Of course you have. All of us have been confused at one time or another. A number of years ago my wife, Ellie and I went to France for vacation. We rented a nice little apartment in the south of France near Nice. We rented a car at the train station and had what I thought were good directions to the apartment.

This was in the days before smart phones with GPS on them so I had printed out a couple pages of directions. Initially all went well and we got to within 2 miles of the apartment but then I realized that we were driving in great big circles, passing the same landmarks several times. I was totally confused and growing frustrated, so I pulled into the parking lot of a small shopping center to ask for directions (I know, men, that asking directions is the ultimate sign of betrayal but that's how frustrated I was)

When I tried to use the payphone in the parking lot I realized that it didn't accept coins but only a phone card. I had no idea where to get a phone card so I exited the phone booth and just stood forlornly in the parking lot. About that time, a man and his son came out of a store and must have seen how distressed I looked. He approached me and said in French, "May I help you?" In my very poor French I tried to explain my dilemma, but he stopped me and said, "I speak English."

I breathed a sigh of relief and told him we were lost and showed him the address of where we wanted to go. He said, "Follow me," and like a good disciple I did. He drove straight to our apartment and waved as we turned into the complex. We were so relieved and grateful for guidance.

When we are confused, we really do need guidance. Twenty-seven hundred years ago, the prophet Micah spoke to the confusion of the Israelites and guided them into a clearer path. He summarized the people's confusion and God's requirements in

three of the most beautiful and powerful verses in the Old Testament. Micah laid the foundation for this clear summation in the first five verses, which summon the listener to a court case, where it appears that God is on trial.

Micah summons all the world with these words, "Hear what the Lord says: Rise and plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice." With all the world, from the heights to the depths sitting as the jury, God begins a defense with the questions: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?"

Quickly, God recites a series of exodus images which remind the people of the mighty ways that God has protected and led them. Clearly, it is no longer God who is on trial, for God has shown steadfast love in leading the people out of slavery and into freedom. The people are forced to face the pettiness of their complaints against God.

As God steps down from the witness stand, the world jury listens intently to the rebuttal of the people, who realize that the tables have been turned and they are now on the witness stand:

"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?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give Him my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

God's people were genuinely confused about their relationship with God. The people could not understand why things had gone wrong in their world. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians, and their own kingdom, Judah, was in severe danger of following suit. "Has God abandoned us", they wondered. "What do we have to do to set things right?"

Don't we feel that way sometimes? There are times in our lives when we feel like nothing is going right - relationships are threatened, disease or illness plagues us, school or work seems more difficult, death steals loved ones and the whole

country seems to be at odds. These are the times that many people feel deserted by God.

The problem is, that most of us being egocentric, figure when we feel a distance between us and God that God has moved. But the reality is that God has shown steadfast love for us through the ages. When all is not right between us and God, we need to return to the basics. That's what the Israelites did in asking their questions.

But they didn't go back far enough. They questioned the quantity, but not the quality of their sacrifice to God. The Israelites were certain that what God wanted from them was a ritual sacrifice. "After all," they cried, "we've always done it that way." (sound familiar?)

Their only question was how costly the sacrifice should be in order to please God and get things back on track in their lives. Should it be burnt offerings, yearling calves, thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil, or even their firstborn? The sacrifices are in an ascending scale of value, culminating with the ultimate sacrifice imaginable - the sacrifice of a firstborn. Little did they know that seven hundred years later, it would be God, not them, who would make the ultimate sacrifice of a firstborn for them.

If things are not going well for us, we assume, like those so-called "primitive" people, that we need to do something more of what we've always done. What Micah told the Israelites and us is that when our relationship with God is unsatisfactory, we do not necessarily need to do something more; we need to do something different.

"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?"

To do justice means more than being fair or impartial. Justice is not just a concept we support, it is something in which we actively engage ourselves. Doing justice means trying to set right those things that have gone wrong in our world. Jesus tells us quite clearly in Matthew 25 that justice is feeding the hungry, satisfying the thirsty, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the imprisoned.

To love kindness doesn't mean just being cordial or polite, it means steadfastly loving others no matter what. The Hebrew word used here is the same word used elsewhere to describe God's enduring love for the people of Israel, in spite of their sin and disobedience. Each time the people of Israel turned away from God, the Lord reached out to them and drew them back into a loving relationship.

And so it is for us. No matter how far off the path we stray, God reaches out to guide us back. We don't deserve that kind of love - no one does. Yet, that is what God offers us as a free gift. God clearly demonstrated that kind of love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To love kindness, we must show that kind of love to others. Unconditional love is not easy, but its benefits far outweigh the consequences of unrelenting resentment.

To do justice and to love kindness are actions we are called to take with others. However, the third aspect of discipleship, describes the nature of our relationship with God. To walk humbly with God means we must obey and submit ourselves to God's will. Pride has no place in our relationship with God. We need to recognize that no matter what we do, we stand before God like everyone else - as sinners saved by God's grace. As St. Paul reminded the prideful church in Corinth: "God chose what is low and despised in the world,.... so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor.1:28 & 29).

Of all the words God could have chosen to speak through the prophet Micah - righteousness, morality, judgment, purity, unity, peace, He chose these three - justice, kindness, and humility. Action words, to be sure, but all words that focus outwardly.

Fast forward 700 years or so and another prophet, this one named, Jesus, preached to those gathered what I think is an elaboration of Micah's words. He did this in the sermon on the mount in what we call the Beatitudes. Jesus says to the newly recruited disciples that they are blessed if they are poor in spirit, if they are mourning, meek, hungry and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, growing in heart, peacemakers rather than victors in war, and persecuted for doing right. Doesn't that sound an awful lot like doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?

Consider what is within you that you would prefer to dispense with, disassemble, grow out of, get over, get fixed, cast out or even junk. There is a very good chance that in your list will be the very kind of things Jesus called "blessings." The reason that they are blessings for us is that Jesus tells us, particularly when we are poor, empty, and mournful, that he is here for us. "I'm on your side." And believe me, that is a blessing.

The word for poor comes from the Greek verb meaning "to cower, to cringe." Thus, Jesus is talking about the abysmally poor, those who are at the end of their rope. For such people, people, at times, like us, God isn't some intellectual exercise. God is their only hope. In blessing the poor in spirit, Jesus says that for all such "failures," for everyone who hasn't got it all together, spiritually speaking, God is there for them. God blesses those who aren't good at being spiritual, those who know their sin and feel it.

Those who know what it's like to be dispirited are more likely to get inspired. Remember that when Jesus was roundly criticized for the disreputable company he kept, he said, "If you are well - full, saved, certain, content - you don't need a doctor. I've come only for the sick. I've come to invite sinners, even good sinners, into the Kingdom of God."

Make no mistake about it, we Presbyterians fall into that category alright - good sinners. Most of us here are successful, religiously speaking. We are here today because we're fairly good at singing to God, praying and believing. But if, even amid all this fullness, belief and beauty we find ourselves empty, wanting, unsteady, silently hurting, poor in spirit, then Jesus has some good news for us. Jesus blesses us in the midst of our inadequacy.

Most people seem to think that the church is in the business of helping people find sure answers, certain solutions, firm faith, credible creeds, and spiritual competency. The popular notion is that the church is supposed to inspire us by appealing to our strengths. Instead, the church is to bless us by ministering to our weaknesses.

God blesses us all: troubled souls, questioning minds, insatiable skeptics, fallers-from-grace, stumblers in the dark, moral bunglers, failures at faith, and inept believers. God blesses us, the poor in spirit, and has promised us the Kingdom of God.

That's what it means to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Jesus took Micah's words and fleshed them out – literally. May God grant us the grace to do the same.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen