

“Love Your Neighbor—It’s What Is Good”
September 29, 2024

Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 9:9-13

In this fractured and polarized world, we seek to be those who love our neighbor. And we try all sorts of ways to do this—some more effective than others.

Jesus speaks to the Pharisees—and so, he speaks to us as well: “Go and learn.”

“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

We seek to be those who love our neighbors. We are sent back to scripture to grow in our wisdom of what God desires. And we have so much to learn. I know I certainly do. I’m still puzzling through the scripture lessons we heard this morning. So, I invite you to come along with me as we go and learn.

As we’ve heard in recent weeks, our love for neighbors is connected to our love for God. Why not sacrifice, then? We remember the stories of the Hebrew scriptures and the importance of sacrifice as an act of worship.

Those first brothers, Cain and Abel, came to blows because for some reason Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God—Cain’s not so much. “Cain was furious and he glowered,” the Bible tells us. He was angry—angry enough to kill.

When Noah left the ark after the waters of the flood subsided, his first act was to offer a sacrifice to God.

Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh: “Let my people go into the wilderness so that they may offer a sacrifice.” It wasn’t that much of a request, but Pharaoh denied it and added more burdens onto the Hebrew people.

The importance of sacrifice as an act of worship cannot be overstated. Indeed, as early Christians began to reflect on the meaning and significance of the death of Jesus, they were helped in their understanding by thinking in terms of sacrifice. The Letter to the Hebrews is one long meditation on Jesus as both priest and sacrifice.

Sacrifice as a religious act of worship puts what we have and who we are in a new perspective. Something of value is given up for the sake of an even greater value. What seems so important is placed before the God who gives life and who is the source of all worth. This, of course, is one reason why we include a financial offering in worship each week. We can get the money needed for our ministry and mission here in other ways—you can send money directly from your bank, you can give online, you can mail a check to the church. But the offering is an act of worship: it both shows and reminds us that we are making a sacrifice when we give. Giving as an act of worship makes a difference in how we live.

At the same time, when we read through scripture, we are struck by the prophetic critique of religious sacrifice.

When people question his actions and his associates, Jesus responds by suggesting that his accusers go back to the prophet Hosea and learn what he meant when he said of God: “I require mercy, not sacrifice.” In fact, *twice* in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus uses these words of Hosea to defend himself.

Micah, too, expresses the prophetic critique that tells us that the love of God, a spirit of gratitude, and acts of kindness and generosity are the sacrifices to which we are called. With the prophets, we might say that the purpose of sacrifice is to lead us into lives that show mercy and compassion, into lives of love for our neighbor.

Maybe you *have* learned this.

If you love someone, if you have raised children or are currently doing so, if concern about a pressing issue has seized you, if you are seeking to make something of beauty in this world, if you are in this city to study and learn, you know about the sacrifices that you made because of kindness, generosity, mercy, and compassion. As we give things such as time and money and even ourselves, we begin to find other ways in which we can be generous, and then, by God’s grace, even kind and merciful and compassionate.

God's desire is that we be such people,

not oppressed by our sufferings,

not hampered by our failings,

not paralyzed by our regrets.

Which is why God loves us as we are. But because God loves us as we are, God does not leave us as we are. The writer Anne Lamott put it this way: “I have a relationship with a God who is so tender and so willing to keep letting me start over. I can’t blow it so badly that God doesn’t still love me—and I can also feel in me the stirrings of wanting to get a little bit cleaner on the inside and a little bit quieter and a little bit less self-driven.”¹

So perhaps you breathed a sigh of relief this morning when you heard Jesus say: “I came not to call the righteous, but to call the sinners.”

Which is just the point. Christianity is not for those who have it made, who are confident in their own goodness and feel that they are getting better all the time. God's passion instead seems to be for those who know their limitations, their finitude—their sin.

It is as such people that we can see beyond sacrifice to the good that we have been shown.

We heard the well-known words of the prophet, Micah—that we should do justice, love kindness,

and walk humbly with our God. Those are some of the most familiar words in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are beautiful words. And they speak of a simple way made known in the straightforward requirements of God.

But remember what the people said to the prophet Micah when he spoke: “Do not preach—one should not preach of such things.”

Maybe we can understand why. God’s requirements for human beings are deceptively simple. And in their simplicity, they both convict us of sin and call us to a new way of life.

So often we would prefer a more difficult way—one that seems to require a lot but that can let us skirt the real demands of life before God.

Yes, complex times often need complex solutions. Difficult situations push us toward deep thought and prayer, honest and open conversation, and forthright action.

Quite often, however, a simpler approach is what we need.

Do you remember St. Augustine’s suggestion: “Love and do as you will.” The good saint implies that to the extent that we love God and our neighbor, we will do little damage in our actions.

Simple.

Maybe it is to avoid the difficult work of love that we add other burdens to our lives and to the lives of others as well.

The question we heard in the reading from Micah this morning asks: “What does the Lord require?” It must be something demanding, something difficult, something complex. *Please let it be* something demanding, something difficult, something complex.

The prophet wrestled with that question:

With what shall I come before God?

Shall I come before God with burnt offerings?

Will God be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

In other words: “How much do I have to *give* in order to *get* God’s favor?”

Micah even goes so far as to ask:

“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression?”

How *much* does God want?

What does God want?

The German theologian Hans Kung has been of more help to me in this area than most others. He says: “God wills nothing for God’s own sake. God wills nothing for God’s advantage or glory. God wills nothing but humankind’s advantage, true greatness, and ultimate glory.” He concludes: “This then is God’s will: our well-being.”² God’s incarnation in Jesus, the resurrection, the sending of the Spirit—all part of God’s work toward what God wants.

What God wants is life, not death

health, not sickness,

love, not hate

peace, not violence

What God wants is fullness of life for each individual and for all people. *What God wants* is our well-being.

It’s that simple—and that challenging.

After wrestling with what the requirements of God might be, Micah says: “Listen up! God has told us what is good.”

“Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God”—three simple phrases that pretty much sum up the requirements of God.

The justice Micah is concerned with is somewhat different from our modern notion of justice: a decision based on law, handed down in an impartial court. Justice is about right relationships and the fulfillment of responsibilities that arise out of those relationships—relationships between a ruler and the people, between parents and children, citizens and resident aliens, and so on.³

This congregation is a good a place to practice such a way of life—and in doing so to discover both its demands and its blessings. As we seek right relationships with one another and with God in *this community*, we become better equipped to do justice beyond these walls.

In this way, when hearing grows dim, when love is slight, when despair and disillusionment grow strong—and you know these things happen—we might find support from one another along the way. There is great comfort and great strength to be found in knowing that we are in this together.

We keep finding that from our efforts in this place on this corner, we are equipped to create right relationships down the block, across the city, and around the world.

Together, we become those who do justice.

Together, we become those who love kindness—or as many translations read: “Love mercy.” In Hebrew, the root of the word for mercy means “womb.” It speaks of the motherly love of God who cares for all her creation. And we are called to such care, such compassion ourselves—toward our neighbors, toward all creation. Again, we are called into relationship.

Together, we become those who love kindness.

And together, in relationships of mercy, of loyalty, of love, we discover that more and more, we are finding a deeper grounding of our lives in God, a closeness to our Creator. The Hebrew word for ethics is *halacha*, which means “walking.” The task of ethics, as one person put it, is to help us discover how we might best walk through day-by-day life.⁴

Together, we walk humbly with our God.

Love your neighbor. Beyond sacrifice is mercy.

Love your neighbor in the way you have been shown: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

¹ Page: 2

Anne Lamott, *Christian Century*, July 28-August 4, 1999, pg. 744.

² Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*

³ Bernhard Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets*, pg. 43

⁴ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, pg. 192-193.