

Walk This Way, Talk This Way

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Text: Micah 6:1-8

Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing unto you our rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

Maybe some of you also know the song that comes to my mind when I hear this scripture.

He has shown thee (He has shown thee)

O Man (O Man)

What is good and what the Lord requires of thee.

But to do justice (But to do justice)

And to love mercy (And to love mercy)

And to walk humbly with thy God.

This is a verse that is loved and claimed by all Christians. We all like the sound of it. It's inspirational and aspirational. But the context is less often known. Were the challenge of it recognized, I wonder if this verse would be as beloved.

And when I say beloved, I mean we plaster it everywhere! If you take a look on Amazon, you'll see that you can get almost anything with this verse on it. Take a look! We have: wall hangings, mugs, t-shirts, key chains, decals, bags, necklaces, and more. I even found underwear with this verse on it.

Now I don't actually want to denigrate all this. I, too, love this verse. This verse is less of a "Jesus loves you" moment and more of a

"the-God-of-the-universe-is-so-frustrated-with-the-fact-th

at-you-don't-get-it-and-therefore-is-trying-to-make-it-super-clear-and-easy-to-remember-how-to-live" sort of verse. It's less of an affirmation and more of an expression of frustration or certainly a call to action. Putting it on a t-shirt isn't a bad thing at all. It's a good reminder. But It's a reminder that we have messed up and continue to mess up.

Unsurprisingly, throughout scripture, the form scripture takes reflects the time and culture in which it was written. When we read the creation stories found in Genesis, they follow a form found elsewhere in the region at that time. When we read Paul's letters in the New Testament, they reflect the way other letters of the time were written. The Psalms echo the poetry of their time period just as our kids in school today might learn to write sonnets or haikus to understand better the cultures and times in which those forms were created.

In the case of the sixth chapter of Micah, it is also following a known format. It is set out as a lawsuit. In the first two verses, God introduces the proceedings. He demands that the people of Israel defend their behavior and he calls the very foundations of the earth...the mountains, to hear them and be the judge of the case.

And then God brings the case. And I mean, God brings it. God comes in this passage with what one commentator describes as "heartfelt bewilderment". At the outset of this

court case, God pleads with God's people to defend themselves.

“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!”

God remembers to them the ways God has acted on their behalf. God brought them out of slavery. God delivered blessing to them. God provided for the nation's miraculous crossing of the Jordan into the promised land with Joshua leading the charge as guided by God.

At every turn, God has provided for them. So what are they doing?

The people seem to have forgotten their story. They're history. They've forgotten these and the many other ways that God has provided for them and protected them. And in forgetting their history, they have fallen out of right relationship with God and with one another. They are no longer living in the values the people of God are supposed to show.

They've forgotten their story and when we forget history, history repeats itself. It's no different for us than it was for them. When we forget that we are, almost all of us, immigrants or the children or descendants of immigrants, we begin to “other” the more recent immigrants. We forget

that we were the recipients of hospitality and we begin to hoard our resources and blame the most recent arrivals for . . . for problems created by our own greed.

In this passage we see that God is pained. God is hurt. God is grieved by their seeming indifference to the generosity God has shown them. God wants them to explain their behavior.

The people of Israel respond with a sarcasm that any teen could be proud of. They are petulant and petty. Instead of realizing they have been rightly called out, they respond with exaggeration.

Burnt offerings were part of the daily activity of the temple. But here Israel asks if God would be satisfied with a thousand rams. This is ridiculous.

In the sitcom Friends, there is an episode when Monica, the obsessive, detail-oriented, type-A hostess with the mostest, is planning a party. She is supposedly partnering with one of her best friends, Phoebe who is whimsical and likely not to remember her commitment or live up to Monica's crazy high expectations. To keep control, Monica only gives Phoebe two things to be responsible for: cups and ice. That's it. She is to bring the party cups and the ice. Monica will do all the decorating, food prep, invitations, and everything else.

Phoebe is offended. Rather than push back, she decides to go all in. If she's going to be in charge of cups and ice, she will be all about cups and ice. When the scene of the party opens, there are cups everywhere. There are strings strung across the living room with red solo party cups strung on them to provide decoration.

And ice? There's ice in the punch, there are snow cones, there are so many ways ice and cups are employed. Monica gave her cups and ice so she did her part with abandon and more than a little bit of attitude.

That's a bit of the attitude we see here. Cups and ice? I'll show you cups and ice! And here Israel says, "Burnt offerings?!? I'll show you burnt offerings!!!" Oil? Not just the oil prescribed...we'll bring 10,000 rivers of oil! You want an offering? I'll give you my first born child! (As a side note, with a few notable individual exceptions, child sacrifice was not a thing in that time or in that region for any religion.) The idea of giving one's first born as an offering is another huge, sarcasm-filled exaggeration.

God has charged them with forgetting who they are and who they are called to be and rather than responding with contrition and humility, they go all in on attitude.

And so God responds with graciousness born out of character and out of hurt. God is telling them that they've

missed the entire point. God is trying to paint out for them what they need to do in the clearest possible terms. God is letting them know that they don't need to remember numbers of offerings and they don't need to measure out oil.

God wants something different. Something more core. God wants them to reflect God's values. And God whittles it down to an elevator speech. When one has a new idea and is trying to pitch it to grab the attention of venture capitalists, you're supposed to have your elevator speech ready to be able to communicate the heart and originality of your idea in the time it takes to ride the elevator from floor to floor.

God simplifies God's expectations. Without watering them down. It's so concise it can be mistaken for being simple. So concise it can fit on a keychain.

What does God require? To do justice. To love mercy. To walk humbly with your God.

It's a call to action, yes. But it's also a refutation and a rebuke to those who would seek to check off the boxes that allow one to feel faithful without deeply struggling with what it means to follow God.

Ironically, much of the American church has turned this new guideline into another checklist, acting as if loving the idea of justice and mercy and humility fulfills what God laid out

for those who purport to follow God. More often preferring closure or peace in lieu of justice. Choosing indifference over true mercy. And holding ironically proudly to the thought of their own humility.

But it's more complicated than that.

Maybe we, too, should hear God saying to us. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" And then heed God's call to justice, mercy and humility.

Justice like wrongly imprisoned people being set free and rightly imprisoned people being rehabilitated rather than left to rot. Immigrants fleeing horrible circumstances not rounded up, but seen and helped to start a new life. Families without resources remembered and helped. And so much more.

It can never become a checklist. We can't make a radical call into cute decoration. Rather it's intended to be a check. On our attitude. On our actions. On our commitment to a call to be those who are bringing the Good News of a loving God to every corner of life.

So carry the key chain. Wear the t-shirt. Put the decal on your water bottle. But allow it to be not a declaration of holiness or cute decoration, but a call to action. A call not to just talk this way, but also to walk this way. Amen.

