**Sermon for Jan. 29 - Micah 6:1-8 - What Am I To Do?**

 **It’s a desperate plea, even, sometimes, existential. “What am I to do?” Other times, it’s more practical, but always urgent.**

 **A little boy blond boy, 10 years old, dressed in khakis and a blue striped polo shirt, stands in the companionway of the giant jet, bound for Tokyo. He is flying for the first time unaccompanied, to visit his father there. Suddenly frightened, he turns to his mother and asks, “What do I do now?” Wishing she could simply take his hand and go with him, she guides him to the flight attendant, hugs him good-bye, turns to go.**

 **An old man, confused and uncertain because of dementia, looks to his wife after breakfast. “What should I do now?” And she has no answer. What is he to do, given the diminishments he endures. His plea is poignant, often repeated. What should I do?**

 **And this past August, lying in a hospital bed in Maine, I too agonized - What am I to do now? I had taken a terrible fall off of a high dock ramp and fractured my pelvis in four places. I couldn’t walk, or barely even move, and I needed oxycodone every four hours for pain. Would I ever move normally, drive, walk my dog again? Would I ever stand in this pulpit or at that altar again? What was I to do? I remembered a prayer I’d always loved in the PrayerBook, so when dear David Griswold called during those hazy first few days, I asked him to read it. Here it is:**

 **“This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the spirit of Jesus. Amen.”**

 **Amen indeed. David’s voice and the words of the prayer calmed me, addressed my urgent questions about what next, what to do. Be brave, and quiet and patient and gallant - not strong suits of mine, to be sure, but comforting in the face of my hurting body and spirit. Those words, prayed that day, will be with me always.**

 **I could go on and on, story after story about all the times when we don’t know what to do, don’t know what is required. It’s such a human question; it arises always out of vulnerability and often fear. What are we to do? The examples I’ve given so far are about the question on a practical, individual level. They arise in particular life circumstances, and they include no direct reference to God. But the question can be much more sweeping.**

 **And so I turn now to the majestic passage from the prophet Micah and his famous words that perhaps address the question better than any others. It is these lines that ring out:**

 **“With what shall I come before the Lord?”**

 **“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.”**

 **Here the question becomes theological, a question and answer between us and God - not what others expect of us, not just what next practical steps we must take, but indeed how it is we are to live our lives, both as individuals and in community. Maybe these words seem too grand for the small uncertain boy at the airport, or the old man facing an empty day or my own very personal concerns about recovery. So let’s move now to the grander scale of Micah’s prophecy.**

 **Do justice, love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. This passage really came alive for me around the time when the late Jane Homes Dixon, became the Bishop pro tem of this diocese. This passage was like a mantra for Jane, and she would remind us of how often we confuse the first two commands. Jane would say we love justice, but don’t do it, we do only kindness when we feed the hungry and provide shelters. We love the idea of a just society but fall far short of actually doing what it would take to end homelessness and hunger. I am cheered by the several ways this community IS taking seriously the actual doing of justice - through the WIN, our work to end family homelessness, the ways we are addressing structural sin. This work must go alongside the many ways we do kindness - the Water Ministry, Diaper Drive, the refugee families, all the ways we do show kindness to others. Do justice, love kindness - not love justice and do only kindness.**

 **But it’s not really either/or, is it? It’s not do one and love the other, but do and love both. And again, we can reflect on this at the personal level, the realm of our daily lives as well as the grand sweep of our society, our world.**

 **At the personal level, parents know well about both doing and loving justice, and doing and loving kindness. We need to hold our kids to account, instill in them a love of justice and fairness, and we need to love them unconditionally. At the societal level, we need to treat prisoners and refugees and even criminals kindly, even as we figure out how to treat all people justly. It’s a double imperative, a fierce moral appeal.**

 **And speaking of a fierce moral appeal, in connection with this question about what are we to do, what is required of us, a new book practically jumped off the shelf at me last summer - How to Be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question. Catnip to me, an incipient perfectionist! Wow! It’s by Michael Shur, and here’s the thing:
Shur is a comedian; he’s young, a TV writer and producer - worked on the show Parks and Recreation. This is not a graybeard teaching moral philosophy 101! In fact there are parts of the book that are hysterical, so spot on about how much we want to be good people, how hard we try, how often we fail, but even so, how much it is worth it to try. Shur gives a brief overview of the major schools of ethics; he addresses increasingly tough moral questions with very specific examples, often quite funny. Here’s one chapter heading - a very long one: “We’ve Done Some Good Deeds, and Given a Bunch of Money to Charity, and We’re Generally Really Nice and Morally Upstanding People, So Can We Take Three of These Free Cheese Samples from the Free Cheese Sample Plate at the Supermarket Even Though It Clearly Says “One Per Customer”? You get the flavor!**

 **And as I read along, delightedly following Shur’s questions and examples, I realized how slyly and gradually he convicts us. We never WILL be perfect; there aren’t correct answers to every moral question - maybe some, but never all, and regardless, we will never be able to always do the right thing! Here’s where walking humbly with our God comes in. We can’t, no matter how hard we try, always get it right! Shur encourages humility; he doesn’t condemn our failures. He maintains that the effort to be good is worth it, and that trying again, and again and again after failure, is what is required. He knows we need to apologize when we wrong someone, and he acknowledges the role of forgiveness, saying that to offer or receive it is a gift of grace. Here again, humility and the willingness to keep trying are more important than moral perfection.**

 **I return now to our scriptures and the original question addressed by Micah about what God requires of us. Doing and loving justice and kindness are of course hard in so many ways, and along with Michael Shur, we need to be aware of our limitations and thus our need for humility. So, what am I to actually, specifically do? What is required of me, of us? I wondered if today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel might offer an answer. It is the familiar Beatitudes - the series of Blesseds that Jesus offers in his Sermon on the Mount. It is so often read, yet it challenges me always.The blessed are almost all things that most of us don’t want to be, poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, while other blesseds are things we find it really hard to be - merciful and pure in heart and peacemaking. And Matthew’s Jesus doesn’t give examples; he holds out this ideal of perfect blessedness, and tells us to rejoice and be glad because our reward will be in heaven. How can these words help us do justice, and love mercy - how can these help us know what to do in at least a little more detail?**

 **And then last week, from Courtney Hundley on our staff, came a gift - an alternative set of beatitudes, if you will. They are by Kate Bowler, a writer and associate professor at Duke Divinity School. Bowler is talking about people who care for other people, particularly those who are ill, but I believe her words have a far wider application.**

 **Here are Bowler’s beatitudes:**

**“Blessed are the noticers.**

 **The ones who see the story in its fullness.**

 **Blessed are the attend-ers.**

 **The witness-bearers.**

 **The story-holders.**

 **The ones who tiptoe to the edge right alongside us,**

 **knowing that the very act will break their heart in pieces**

 **too.**

 **Blessed are those who are amazed by a life lived in its**

 **fragility, its brevity, its beauty.**

 **Blessed are the ones who stand close enough to say:**

 **“Behold.”**

 **This is their love.**

 **This is their dumb hobby.**

 **(And) These are the people they (these blessed) loved through every hilarious failure.**

 **These are their bad habits and favorite songs.**

 **This is the marvel I get to know,**

 **Behold. This is not a problem to be solved.**

 **This is a person to be loved.**

 **And how lucky are we?**

 **These people. These loves.**

 **These precious, precious days.**

 **Maybe Bowler’s words do not do justice to the grand societal scale of the imperatives of justice and kindness that Micah lays out. Detailed answers to that question “What am I to do?” and the underlying “What does God require?” are so various, they can never be spelled out - not in the Bible, not in a contemporary humorous book, not in any one place. Perhaps sometimes the answers can only be found in the depths of our hearts - the places where love calls us to care in the best ways we know how - but I hope these contemporary beatitudes can prompt us, can help each of us to respond to the question, “What am I to do?” in fruitful and faithful ways. Amen.**

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