

God's Expected Offering
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

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Micah 6:1-8 in parts: prophet calling people to present case; God as wronged party (plaintiff); Israel as defendant

PROPHET: Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with God's own people; so, God will contend with Israel.

GOD: ³"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord."

DEFENDANT: ⁶"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

PROPHET: ⁸ God 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?

This morning we begin four Sundays of passages in Matthew 5, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which extends into chapter 7. The sermon opens with the familiar twelve verses of what we call the Beatitudes, the blessings, because each phrase begins, "Blessed are..."

I like the linkage between Micah and Matthew in today's readings, because both are tied to God's acts of deliverance and hope. In our Micah passage, God reminded Israel of being freed from its time of oppression in Egypt and being welcomed into the promised land, with Joshua leading them across the Jordan at Shittim. God reminded them because the people have forgotten; thus, the history lesson is also an accusation, "Have you forgotten all I have done for you?" Israel is often reminded of their history as refugees and exiles, and God's admonition that they are to welcome the sojourner, the refugee, the foreigner into their midst.

Matthew's Gospel parallels the Exodus theme, portraying Jesus as the new Moses. For Moses, the oppression was from Egypt; for Jesus it will come from both from empire of Rome and the rulers of the temple. Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive God's Torah, the law; in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up and sits on the mountain to offer God's teaching.

Yet, at this point, the parallel is not exact, for the Beatitudes are not commandments in the way we think of the Big Ten! Commandments Moses brought down. The Beatitudes, the blessings, are not in the imperative form of, "Thou shalt...", but more, "If you do, you will be blessed..."

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say, “You have heard it said...” and reference the law of Moses; and then say, “But I say to you...” and offer a command that is often harder to keep, and more relational, such as changing eye for an eye retribution to turning the other cheek.

We can hear the Beatitudes as a prelude of promise and hope. This morning, let us share the blessings as a reading, with separate men’s and women’s parts, until the end when we all speak the last blessing together. The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1-12:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

MEN: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

WOMEN: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

MEN: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

WOMEN: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

MEN: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. WOMEN: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

MEN: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

WOMEN: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

ALL: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Perhaps you have seen the phrase on a bumper sticker or a poster: “God is on the phone...and she is angry.” There are variants to the word angry, and the use of the feminine gender is meant to arouse a chuckle, but I think it fits our lesson in Micah 6.

Our knowledge of the prophecy of Micah is often limited to the oft-used last verse of our lesson: *“and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”* Certainly one could do worse with a favorite verse of Scripture to post on your refrigerator or carry in your wallet as a daily reminder. Some consider it the Golden Rule of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Yet, by hearing the Micah lesson read in parts, we captured the context of these beloved words in a courtroom, with God bringing an imagined lawsuit against God’s own people of Israel. The prophet calls for the people to present themselves before God. God, as plaintiff in the case, testifies to the broken relationship, beginning with a review of all God did to free Israel from Egypt’s oppression, protect them from Moab’s King, and clear their passage across the Jordan and into the promised land. God’s testimony is like our saying to a family member, “After all I have done for you, you treat me this way?” (God is calling, and she is angry!)

We then move to Israel's response as the defendant. No real defense is offered. There is an implied guilt. Israel wants to "get right with God," and poses a litany of questions as to exactly what offering will satisfy God. The three suggested offerings increase from a single year-old calf to one thousand sheep – animals being within the tradition of Jewish sin offerings – but then comes the shocking fourth question: "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Israel is admitting its transgression, but wondering how much God expects in restitution. The prophet will answer for God, but suffice it to say, Israel's questions show they have no clue of God's expected offering.

We may have had times in our lives when we knew we had wronged someone, and gone to that person and said, "I want to make things right between us." Then, we told the person how we were going to do so, only to hear, "I already told you how you could make this right, and it is not what you are suggesting."

Israel limited its offering to traditional sin sacrifice, measured by cows, sheep, or oil; and then, God forbid, even suggested God might demand a child as foreign gods did. The suggested offerings confirmed they had either forgotten, or chosen to ignore, what God truly expected of the people. Again, the prophet closes the courtroom scene with a sense of, "Israel, if God told you once, you have been told a thousand times what offering is expected."

The favorite verse of what the Lord requires seems to be less an imposed sentence to be served, and more a condition of probation. Micah 6:8 is a reminder of the kind of offering God expects each and every day from the faithful. If Israel would do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, no punishment need be rendered, for this is the faithfulness God desires and requires.

The Hebrew prophets remind us sin in God's eyes is almost always broken relationships, not unfulfilled legalities. When Israel coveted the cultic practices of other religions, or created golden calves, its sin was abandoning a trust in their one and only God. Its prophets often named Israel's sin as abandonment of the core community values God had given to stand it apart as a nation.

As a parallel, I recall when our parents, at age 75, purchased a lot in a housing development being built right behind the house in which they had lived for thirty years. You too may have moved into a brand new housing development, where a common caring often takes hold because everyone is a newcomer. People organize block parties, print a phone and email directory, and may even have a neighborhood webpage so they can come to know each other. A sense of community builds. When a need arises or crisis occurs, everyone seeks to respond. An older person is hospitalized, and the neighbors diligently check in with the spouse. When my father broke his wrist, two neighbors brought their snow blowers to clear the driveway. A neighbor loses a job, and meals are regularly provided.

This is how Israel was formed, as a new nation with this sense of community care instilled within it. New church developments, where everyone is a new member, often portray the same spirit of community care. Yet, over time, as the first settlers of a new neighborhood, or the charter members of a church move away, or die, the original vision and spirit can fade. So too, in times of national fear or economic crisis, people often withdraw to secure themselves, rather than look out for the needs of others.

It is at such tough times, more than the good times, when Micah's reminder of what the Lord requires needs to be heard: to do justice by not allowing those with little money or power to be mistreated by those with much; to love kindness by ensuring the least within the community – particularly, the widow and orphan and foreigner – were sheltered, fed and clothed; to walk humbly, by remembering, next to God, no one can pridefully gloat.

The reality is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly can cost you during hard times. We might be hesitant to be too vocal about justice for a fellow worker, if our own job may be in jeopardy. We limit kindness if we are not sure we will have enough for ourselves. We even wonder about being humble when it seems it takes touting ourselves to be a success. We may worry if we say the wrong thing to the powers that be, that our phones will be tapped or emails monitored.

Tough times were also part of the life of the first century community for which Matthew wrote his Gospel. The Roman empire was intent on keeping power by quelling dissent and taxing heavily; religious leaders were seeking to survive, and being dependent on Rome, would not speak up for the oppressed or poor, and certainly not for a fringe group uplifting a dead man named Jesus. If there was ever a need for a deliverer it was now; thus, Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses.

Moses went up Mount Sinai and brought back the Ten Commandments. Jesus goes up a mountain, and offers a new set of guidelines for faithfulness – but that is after the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are not really an outline for how we are to be; for example, how exactly do you purposely become poor in spirit? Is being meek the same as being humble? Is there a formula for purity of heart? I am thinking the Beatitudes could be read again at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, as God's blessings on faithfulness, including following Micah's call to justice, kindness and humility.

Put another way: if your offering is Micah, God will bless you with Matthew. In other words, if you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, particularly in the rough times of life, God's blessings will be waiting for you.

If we offer up Micah's justice, kindness and humility in a harsh world of self-protection, we are probably going to pay for it. You do justice in speaking truth to power, and you may very well end up spirit poor – you may also lose your job, and become financially poor. You do kindness, and you will likely be ridiculed for advocating for the most vulnerable, and viewed as meek. Your kindness may lead you to plant seeds of peace, but you may see few seeds bearing fruit and you will find yourself hungering for righteousness. It is almost guaranteed the faithful will become mournful about the state of the world.

Being poor in spirit and meek, thirsting for righteousness and being persecuted for it, are not commands Jesus gives us to follow, but the price we pay for faithfulness to God's expected offering for us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

The Beatitudes offer the kingdom promise that gives us strength and courage to make God's expected offering. With the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "I have good news: you do it, and I'll bless it, and bless you, with comfort and mercy, and a kingdom inheritance where you will be called God's children. And one more thing," Jesus says, "I will show you with my own life, how the expected offering is made."