

***“DO Justice, LOVE Kindness,
WALK Humbly with God!”***

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 13

Micah 6:1-8; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Proper 13, 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 6, 2017 dedicated to Rylan Antonio Ahrens, newly baptized into Christian Faith, Rev. Earl Fritz, 90 years old and going strong and to the blessed memory of Frank Hussey, Joe Kufel and James Smith and always to the glory of God!

“DO Justice, LOVE Kindness, WALK Humbly with God!”

Micah 6:1-8; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

On September 8, 2002, in a special congregational meeting, this congregation voted by 98% to become an Open and Affirming (ONA) Congregation of the United Church of Christ. We voted on the statement we have in our bulletin each Sunday. Please turn to it and read with along with me.

We, the members of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, believe the following represents our commitment and desire to reach out and welcome all those in need of and searching for God’s love: We believe that we are all created in God’s image, female and male, and we are called to love our neighbors as Jesus loves us. We believe we are many members, but one body in Christ, and called to unite all people in God’s love. We welcome and affirm all people. We invite those

who are seeking God's presence in their lives to join us on our common journey. Our faith community seeks to unite persons of all ages, races, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, mental and physical abilities, socioeconomic levels and political and theological backgrounds. Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8) (adopted September 8, 2002 by the congregation).

Since September 8, 2002, we have tried to live into this covenant of love and grace. Over the next five weeks, I will reflect on where we have come and what we have done to BE open and affirming to ALL. We start where the statement ends – with Micah 6:8...

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In the 8th Century, BCE, a young Judean prophet arose from Moresheth, a small village southwest of Jerusalem who spoke clearly for God. His name was Micah, which means, "Who is like Yahweh?" or "Who is like God?" Micah offered the

promise of peace in war time, telling the people to *“beat their swords into plowshare and no longer make war upon each other”* (Micah 4:3). He spoke of ruler of the people who would be born in the little town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). And then, when faced with a people who were all wrapped up in trying to bring the right sacrifices to worship in order to cover all their sins and transgressions, Micah framed his answer in a positive statement and proclaimed clearly for all to hear:

The Lord 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?

In other words – God is interested in US! God is interested in the essence of who we are and how we live in relationship to God and all humanity. It's about relationship! What does God require about these relationships? The command is clear – *“DO justice, LOVE kindness and WALK humbly with your God.”* What is less clear (perhaps) is HOW to do all this...

Let's look at Justice. Justice is a very complicated concept. It is important to consider that there no less than four significant discourses on justice today – retributive, restorative, distributive and procedural – are all addressed creatively and substantively in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Quran – and the religious traditions that grow from them. I have preached extensively on retributive, restorative, distributive and procedural justice. I am not going to do that today...lucky you.

Justice in Micah is “**mispat,**” or something people DO. It is not enough to complain that justice is lacking. Rather Micah is calling us to a dynamic concept that calls us to work every

day in every way where we live our lives for fairness, equality and dignity for all – especially for those who are exploited and poor. The takeaway for justice is one in which we live daily in just relationships and work constantly in our own little ways and through the justice work of our community of faith – to change flow of the river of life. Years ago, I saw this quote, *“You can’t change the wind. You can only adjust the sails.”* Justice is the work we do to adjust the sails, catch the wind, and move closer to doing the right thing in God’s name and spirit.

“Loving Kindness” comes from the Hebrew word, **“hesed.”** It is a common word in Hebrew Scriptures. It is a complicated, multi-dimensional word. It has to do with **love, loyalty and faithfulness**. It defines the key element in relationships – whether in marriage or friendship between human friends and God.

So, how are you doing on the “Hesed” scale? How is your **loving kindness** quotient going? How are your human and divine friendships? Have you been loving, loyal and faithful to God and your neighbors and friends? Micah would tell us that there is direct connection between doing justice and being in loving relationships. They are closely related to one another. Let’s be clear: The relationship of “hesed” is driven by love: **Love of God. Love of other people.**

Finally, the holy trinity of doing what God requires is completed when we “walk humbly with our God.” I love what the scholars have written about this phrase. The word “*humbly*” in the Hebrew is better understood as “carefully” or “circumspectly.” And the key word in this phrase is “walk” – “**halak**.” We are to walk with God carefully. We are to walk with God careful to put God first and to live in conformity to God’s will. Our entire life pilgrimage is likened to a walk with God as our constant and abiding companion.

So, how do you walk with God? May I recommend that you walk carefully. All of us have, at some in our lives, learned to walk. If you need a memory of what this might have been like, watch a baby beginning to take first steps. Or watch a person who has knee surgery or hip replacement surgery beginning to step again. It is a careful process – perhaps even a patient process. Attempting to avoid a fall, this careful walk seems precipitous to one who is watching and frightening to one whose steps are making time. But, in the eyes of God, these “baby steps” are watched and received with loving kindness by a grateful God who knows we are trying to move into God’s loving arms. We are making an effort to walk to and walk with God.

As you walk with God, do so with care – the same care that you give to your doing justice and loving tenderly and kindly. If you do, all will be well in our walk with God.

Essentially, three Hebrew words written over 2800 years ago from a small-town Hebrew prophet have guided our faith community's steps through open and affirming for the past 15 years - "*Mispat*," Doing Justice; "*Hesed*," Loving Kindness; and "*Halak*," careful walking with God.

As we begin with the end of our ONA statement today, let's remember the sentence we have embraced: *Together in our diversity, and being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, we will "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God."* We don't do this walk alone. We are fueled and fed, empowered and directed by Ms. Holy Spirit. That means we have to trust our steps in faith to one who gently, kindly, and lovingly clears a path for us into unknown and uncharted territory. I have often said it took us 150 years as faith community to proclaim we were "Open and Affirming" and now it has taken us 15 years to figure out what that means. We got this far by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us celebrate her gifts to us – gifts of openness, kindness and love.

When I was a first-year student at Yale Divinity School hundreds of years ago, there was a saying posted in our

homiletics (or preaching) classroom. It read, “Preach to the people who are not here and they will come.” I always thought that odd when, as 24-year-old, my eyes beheld those words for the first time. However, it has happened for the past (2)35 years of my life. When preaching to those who are not present, somehow Ms. Holy Spirit gets the word out and people come.

It happened last summer during August. I offered a sermon series on Mental Illness – which is addressed in our extravagant love and welcome of our ONA statement. Many, many people who we had never seen before came to worship. They came to listen and learn; to heal and help. Some stayed and some returned to their own faith communities or to their lives away from our faith community – but for a moment in time, Ms. Holy Spirit touched us all and brought us all together to worship and receive God’s love and grace.

Over the next few weeks, there will be words spoken that seem directed to those who are not here. I believe they will come. You will pass the word. You will share with people you know that this a safe place. And whenever you miss opportunities to talk, to share, to reflect on “*Mispat*,” Doing Justice; “*Hesed*,” Loving Kindness; and “*Halak*,” careful walking with God, Ms. Holy Spirit will carry the word to those who need it most. I will simply be the vessel who preaches to those who are not here...

I pray we begin our careful walk with God this week, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit to DO justice and to Love Tenderly and with Kindness. Next Sunday is “**Loving and Welcoming ALL Ages and Races.**” Come and join us and spread the Word... Amen.

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