

From the Pulpit

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*“What Is Required: Doing Justice, Loving
Tenderly, Careful God Walking”*

Micah 6:6-8

*Part I of II in the sermon series, “Foundational
Texts”*

*Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; I Thessalonians 5:1-11;
Matthew 25:13-30*

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 23, November 16, 2014, dedicated to blessed memory of Marie Pfeiffer and Georgia Swinger and in thanksgiving to Kyle Miller and Cameron Wade and all the Eagle Scouts of First Church and their families and always to the glory of God!

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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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As you enter the home of a Jewish friend, most often you will find a Mezuzah (which is the word for doorpost) hung at an angle on the doorpost. It a blessing or a “[mitzvah](#)” to place a mezuzah on the doorposts of Jewish homes arising from the passage in Dt. 6:4-9 –known as the [Shema](#) (“Hear,” from the first word of the passage) *“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord is One.”*

It is the most powerful and central scriptural passage of Judaism.

In the full passage, God’s chosen people are commanded to keep God’s words constantly their minds and hearts by (among other things) writing them on the doorposts of their house.

At First Church, we have our own version of a Shema - one single passage that richly blesses our fellowship each week. It is contained (in part) in our bulletin at the close of our Open and Affirming Statement. It blesses our house of worship and all who cross our threshold to worship within our doors. While I would call Matthew 22:37-40 our Greatest Commandment (next Sunday’s sermon), I would describe Micah 6:8 as our “[mitzvah](#)” – our First Church blessing. “Hear” O First Church!

“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? ⁷ Will 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?”

⁸The 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?

First, the prophet Micah is disturbed as the passage opens. He has been clearly speaking to God’s people about what really matters. To frame it in the negative – it doesn’t really matter that you bring to God all the sacrifices of Temple worship bowing low, burnt offerings, rams and oil and even your firstborn for the transgressions of your life (to which the second and third born and more born say “YES!” O the poor first born! They carry such a heavy burden....).

NO – 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.

First, let me briefly define these terms:

Retributive justice focuses on punishment as a response to violation. The offender violated the law and must pay. It may bestow “satisfaction” on the aggrieved party, whether that is God, a human victim, or “society.” In our utilitarian context, it is also assigned a deterrent effect, and incapacitates the perpetrator so that s/he cannot do it again. This is the concept out of which our racist policies which put African-American men behind bars in overwhelmingly unjust proportions gets lived out. Read Michelle Alexander’s [The New Jim Crow](#) if you need evidence to this

fact. It is also the form of justice which drives our death penalty laws.

Restorative justice emphasizes repairing damage, restitution, taking responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoring relationships. Interestingly, it is also committed to “satisfaction,” but differs from retributive justice in its strategies for righting the balance.

BREAD has worked with restorative justice with young men and women who are in the pipeline to prison and need a second chance before they get swallowed up in the retributive system. Restorative Justice takes cases of first-time, non-violent offenders out of the traditional court room setting and holds meetings at a neighborhood level in order to engage victims and the community in holding the offender accountable. At BREAD’s 2012 Nehemiah Action with nearly 3,000 people in attendance, Lead Juvenile Court Judge Elizabeth Gill committed to spearhead the process of implementing Restorative Justice Circles in Franklin County neighborhoods. Later that year, the Restorative Justice Circles were established in Franklin County neighborhoods. To date, a full-time coordinator has been hired and six neighborhoods have Restorative Justice Circles up and running. These Circles are projected to provide meaningful accountability and diversion to over 100 youth

offenders each year. They face their victims and work out restitution and reconciliation.

Procedural justice aims for fairness in the *processes* of decision-making, including (but not limited to) the adjudication of sin or crime. How do we work out what is broken? What are the procedures of justice in different cases? For those who live and work inside the justice system, this is common sense. They know how to work with the machinery of justice, the procedures of justice. Many of the rest of us get freaked out by “going to court.” But an attorney and a judge will point to the procedures of justice. How justice moves and works. They see it as art and beauty. We see it as scary stuff. The Bible sees it as the way the world turns... the procedures of justice.

Distributive justice sets as its goal the equitable distribution of resources to all members of society, even if the means for doing so contradict some aspects of equal treatment under the law. This form of justice works with the forgiveness of debt in the Jubilee. I am working with 19-30 year olds in my doctoral work on the issue of student debt in America – which has grown to \$1.3 Trillion dollars – greater than credit card debt AND mortgage debt. How do we forgive this debt and help people build and rebuild

meaningful lives. This is equitable and distributive justice at work!

These four forms of justice are often discussed as a pair of binary choices: We support either retributive or restorative methods of justice. We measure fairness by either distributive or procedural means. The religious traditions do not; they expect that *all* of them are required in the pursuit of justice.

Justice in Micah 6:8 is “mispah,” 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 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.

“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. Our own Dr. Washington Gladden summarized this concept of “hesed” when he wrote near the end of his life that the most important quality of religion is “friendship.” Friendship with God and with fellow human beings

So, how are you doing on the “Hesed” scale? How is your loving kindness quotient going? How are your human and divine friendships? 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 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. Attempting to avoid a fall, this careful walk seems precipitous to one who is watching and frightening to one whose steps are making time. A friend recently told me as he gets older, his doctor told him, his range of motion has changed. So, the sweeping movements of yesteryear are gone. Now, he must walk carefully. There is something deeply spiritual and practical about this. Careful walking with God is good. That is what Micah is calling us to do.

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. Amen.

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