

A New Direction  
Micah 6:1-8  
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If you've lived very long at all, you know what it is like to have a relationship with an "Out of Order" sign placed over it.

Relationships of all kinds are messy. Even if we don't mean to, hurting one another is something we do. We say the wrong things. We do the wrong things. We all know what it's like to want to hit the "re-do" button on a friendship at school a marriage or with a colleague at work when our relationship finds itself in the "out of whack" zone.

And for these reasons, what we just heard read this morning from the prophetic book of Micah is a text that's very assessable to us. It is our story too. Like the children of Israel, we know what it is like to need a NEW direction.

If we go back to the beginning of Micah chapter 6 this is the context for our passage: God is upset. The children of Israel have failed to live up to their end of the bargain when it comes to God's expectations for their relationship. And so, what follows is a sparring match with the prophet Micah subbing for God. Micah will express God's concerns. And Israel will express theirs.

And God's concerns are clearly stated in verse 3: *"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!"*

It starts like this: God wants to know what God has done to keep the people from following the ways of the law and the anointed leaders like they used to?

God seeks to jog their memory just a bit reminding them all the ways God has been with them in the past.

God was there to help their ancestors when they were freed from the bonds of Egyptian slavery.

God was with them in the leaders sent to help like Moses, Aron, and Miriam (I just love the shout-out to a woman here, a rarity in scripture).

God was with them when they needed deliverance from their political enemies. And, for goodness sake, they made it to the promise land, just as they had long hoped—one HUGE sign of God being present among them! So, why wouldn't the children of Israel just get with the program . . . And return to God.

Yet, time and time again: people of Israel messed up, Micah says, and when it came to their lives and expressions of faith, their actions kept them from God's best for them. And God kept longing for more! God wanted more in their lives. God wanted a NEW direction in their relationship.

But by time we get to verse 6 of Micah 8, the prose is comical. When the children of Israel ask God: what is the ONE thing I can do to fix their lives? They add the "I'll do anything." For example, they promise to come before the Lord with "thousands of rams" with "ten thousand of rivers of oil" and even, "my firstborn." (It is at this point that we need to laugh) The hyperbole is OUT. OF. CONTROL.

It the definition of what author Anne Lamott calls the extreme: "Help me, help me, help me prayers." For truly, the Israelites were willing to do anything, even the most ridiculous thing if God will just give them the gold star, check mark, we're awesome again stamp.

But is that what God really wants? Thousands of this, ten thousands of that, their own children?

A guilt offering for behavior that was less than best?

In one of my first ministerial internships, I found myself with a supervisor who was shall we say less than present. As much as I wanted to learn from her, be included in her work and take away from the summer we spent together more about how her personal life shaped how she did her job—such didn't happen. I did so much of my work alone. And I left the internship sad. And frustrated. And as you might now, sometimes, when we don't deal with frustration, it often leads to anger. As I noticed this in myself (or maybe more accurately a friend pointed it out in me), I knew I needed to share how I felt with my former supervisor. Make peace. Maybe she had no idea how I felt? Maybe the relationship could still be a

learning one—even though I didn't live in the area? Maybe I could even have an internship do-over the next summer?

When she and I had a chance to talk so I could share my feelings as kindly and honestly as I could, what followed was the definition of “not going well.” This colleague of mine exploded with feelings of hurt and annoyance that I'd spoken the truth about what my experience had been in her context. She knew I was right. She'd ignored me. But she was defensive about it. There would be no internship re-do.

As proud as I was of myself for having the courage to share how I felt with an intimidating and admired lady, I realized I just needed to let my feelings go. Drop it all. And move on.

But, this was until a couple weeks later when I came home one afternoon. To my surprise, I found my doorstep covered in boxes stacked as high as the doorframe! What could it be? I knew I hadn't ordered anything. As my roommate helped me drag the heavy boxes inside, what I realized was this former supervisor sent me a gift.

An entire set of commentaries to be exact. A rare to find set. A collection she thought my library needed. And the icing on the cake was that these commentaries came from her father. With her fathers' old sermons type-written in them! Her beloved father who recently died, I tell you! All his books, she said were now mine. I couldn't believe it. Who me?!? It was a modern definition of trying to mend a relationship with “thousands of rams” and “ten thousands of rivers of oil” and very close to a “first born son” if I ever saw it.

And while I thoroughly appreciated the gift of course and the heavy sum of money it took from her bank account to mail the boxes priority mail across the country, something about our relationship still never quite found solid ground, still to this day even though I have her father's commentaries.

Maybe because of exactly the point the prophet Micah was trying to make in our text when he goes on to offer these words that so many people of faith know by heart:

“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.”

You see, God did not want a specific offering. No presents. No amount of I’m sorry letters. And no big checks written to charity would fix this.

Nope. What God wanted was attention by the people to their character. God wanted the people’s lives to reflect what it meant to be in relationship with their Creator.

My friend, Tyler Mayfield and professor at Louisville Seminary makes it plain here when he writes: “God does not want a specific type of offering. God wants a specific type of person.”

And this specific type of person was one whose life was known by its acts of justice, it’s love of kindness and the humility in which this person walked alongside God.

Have you ever thought about the relationship between these three words? Maybe if we sit with them closely for just a second, we’ll be on our way to this new direction that Micah 6:8 calls us to:

**Justice.**

**Kindness.**

**Humility**

Justice is such a hot button word in faith communities these days, isn’t it? Religious folks of all kinds call out “justice” as the reason why their faith seems all the more political.

Justice, many say, is the reason why people who’ve never protested before to line up in front of Congress, down Pennsylvania Ave or in city centers all over our country. Justice is why many some folks make the choice not to dine at restaurants or buy specific products or travel to specific cities. Justice is the reason sited why my friend Alyssa was arrested this week in protest of how

potential new laws might separate her family one from another as immigrants to this country.

I am a fan of justice. God calls us to use our voice, to use our time, to use our funds to stand up for those who are being mistreated or do not have a voice to speak in our cities.

**But, next comes kindness. Micah says the Lord asks us to “love kindness.”**

And I believe there’s a reason I believe that we’re called to kindness after our call to justice.

**For if we want our messages to have any chance of shining through to hearts who need to hear them, we always must remember to be kind.** To not make any other person less than if they don’t believe or think like we do.

Some translations of this text insert the word “mercy” instead of kindness. I like mercy too. For living a life of mercy means in acting in compassion or forgiveness toward others. It means looking beyond what a person deserves and loving him or her as a beloved child of God, just the same as you want to be treated.

I recently saw a protest sign that simply stated, “Make America Kind again” I think it’s a message we can all agree on.

Kindness can look like stopping to have a conversation with someone who thinks differently than you in the airport or in a pew at church.

It can look like smiling. Opening doors for strangers. Going out of your way to lift someone up who is discouraged. Most of all it can look like listening.

**I picture justice and kindness are social activism twins. We can’t have one without the other and be effective.**

**And lastly, we are asked to “walk humbly with our God.”**

In a journey of faith, humility is an essential virtue, we’re reminded.

Because after all, God is God and we are not.

And if this is true, sometimes we're going to be wrong. Sometimes we're going to miss the mark. We're going to speak too soon or not soon enough. We're going to make a mountain out of a molehill and cause more damage than the goodness we bring.

**So, if our justice wrapped in kindness work is truly going to be what God wants from us– we've got to walk humbly.**

We've got to stay connected to our life-source. We've got to take times out to pray, to think and to re-focus. We've got to move in the spirit of Thomas Merton's famous prayer: "The fact that I think I am following your will doesn't mean that I am actually doing so."

It's our new direction.

My friends for today: where and how is God calling you to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?

Where is God calling you back to relationship?

Here I say, today that writing checks is good. Giving people "peace offering" I messed up, will you forgive me gifts is nice too. But it's not the main thing. It never been the main thing. The main thing has nothing to do with the kinds of checks we could write to missions we support. Or how much we can say "I messed up" "I messed up" "I messed up."

The main thing is the character in which we live all our days (not just when others are watching). The main thing is knowing God and reflecting God's love from the inside out. The main thing is living our lives in such a way that they're a sermon unto themselves.

We do justice. We love mercy. And we watch humbly with God.

If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that God smiles when we do. I mean really smiles. And who doesn't want to make God smile?

AMEN