

Three Simple Things

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 30, 2018

“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?” – Micah 6:8

Those of you who have been spiritually generous enough to listen to my preaching over the years have heard me say from this pulpit more than once that Christianity isn't complicated, it's just hard. I have said that to you based on part on the passage from Micah which I take as my text this morning: “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?”

Three simple demands sum up what it means to do good and to be good: to behave justly, to have an ongoing, intimate relationship with kindness, and to travel your life's journey listening for guidance from God's still-speaking voice. Those demands aren't complicated, they're just hard; and like most hard things, most of us prefer to avoid them. If you are part of that vast company, I want to spend my sermon time with you this morning – this Pledge Sunday – urging you to stop avoiding what we know is good.

We make much of justice in our country. I haven't kept track of the exact number, but I know that the majority of the 86 county courthouses in Ohio I've visited so far have prominently displayed a representation of Lady Justice, blindfolded and weighing the merits of the cases that come before her in her set of scales. Sometimes she's perched atop the dome or over the main entrance of the courthouse, signaling what we expect to find inside. Other times she's part of a mural on the front wall of the Court of Common Pleas, behind the judge's bench, where she's equally hard to miss. Regardless of where she is, the message is the same: our courthouses, which resemble nothing as much as they resemble churches, are temples dedicated to justice.

Our federal government includes a Department of Justice to protect the rights we enjoy as citizens. And when those rights are violated or denied, that Department is under both a moral and legal obligation to see that justice is restored where it may be lacking.

And right here at home, our municipal governments and civic organizations open most of their meetings with a pledge of allegiance that closes with the famous words, “with liberty and justice for all.”

So justice is matters much to us, and yet we know that justice continues to elude us. Not so much because we're bad people, but rather because life isn't fair. Woven into the fabric of existence is a shocking strand of basic unfairness – only God knows why it's there -- which we humans, from the beginning of civilization, have attempted to rectify with justice. Justice is the human attempt to make life a bit more fair, and the scale and profundity of the unfairness is what gives justice its universal importance. In some fundamental and inescapable ways, life as we know it is broken, and God calls us to help heal those wounds wherever we find them. We may not have inflicted them, but that doesn't

make them any the less real.

If you leave church today by exiting through the south doors, you'll be experiencing one of our attempts at justice. It isn't fair that some people are born physically challenged and that others of us become physically challenged through injury or illness or old age.

So even before our government required it through the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, we made the main level of our church building accessible to people who have limited mobility. Yes, of course, we could have continued to carry people up and down stairs as people have done for centuries, but making our building accessible is extending a degree of independence and dignity to folks who don't want to be a burden to others. We all know how that feels.

Justice in human relations does not come naturally – it's something we have to work at. We all, without exception, come into this world completely self-absorbed. Nothing matters to an infant except those things that matter to that infant. Babies sometimes feel to their caregivers like bottomless pits of gimme: gimme food, gimme a clean diaper, gimme something for my painful gums. Gimme, gimme, gimme. And, sadly, some of us never outgrow our gimme stage.

A pastor of mine many years ago told us about his grandson who, at the age of six or seven, was left briefly in the kitchen with his baby sister while their mother stepped into another room to get something. It was just after lunch, and the little boy had asked his mother if he could have a cookie for dessert. She said he could, and when she returned to the kitchen, she found her son with his mouth stuffed full of cookies, his pockets stuffed full of cookies, and both hands stuffed as full of cookies as he could carry. His little sister, in her highchair at the end of the table, was extending her hands toward her older brother. Pastor Blick's grandson looked at his sister, looked at his mother, and then said, through his mouthful of cookie, "Poor little thing. If I had some more, I'd give her one."

As individuals and as nations, some of us never outgrow the moral cluelessness of a six-year-old. When it comes to justice, we're much quicker to demand it for ourselves than we are to work for it for others, especially for those who have been historically denied it by groups more powerful than they are. Affirmative action is under attack now by historically privileged groups who cry, "Unfair, unfair!" even as the playing field remains tilted in their favor. Affirmative action is an attempt to right historic wrongs, and until we can find a better way to right those wrongs, it would be wrong to abandon even an imperfect attempt.

Justice isn't complicated, but it is hard because of that innate selfishness that is baked into each of us at our creation, and which we bring to all of our social and political relations. God calls us to do justice in order to blunt the ravages of our own worst enemy, which is our self-serving selves.

Moving from that broad sphere of interaction that is the realm of justice, the prophet Micah reminds us that God also calls us to love kindness, without which we become bitter and cynical.

Kindness is the most apparent sign of spiritual generosity, and there is no substitute for kindness. The Hebrew word that Micah uses is *chesed*, which, in church-speak, is lovingkindness. The word is used in the book of Ruth several times to describe Ruth's bond with her mother-in-law, and it's also used to describe Boaz's willingness to marry a foreigner in order to keep Naomi's property in her family.

Kindness goes beyond justice insofar as justice is about what we deserve, while kindness is about what none of us deserves. None of us deserves to be treated kindly. We deserve to be treated fairly, we deserve to be treated honestly, and we deserve to be treated respectfully. Those we all deserve.

But when someone treats us kindly, we recognize it as such precisely because we know that

they've gone beyond what we are owed as our due. There are no rules for kindness, because kindness doesn't need rules. Kindness doesn't have a script because it's spontaneous and situational. You never know ahead of time if you will be shown kindness on any given day, and more important, you never know ahead of time when God is going to give you the opportunity to show kindness to another.

And I think that's why Micah told us to love kindness – that is, to develop an intimate, ongoing relationship with kindness. God is telling us through the prophet Micah to make kindness such a regular part of our lives that it becomes second nature to us. None of us would think of going through a day without putting on some kind of clothes, and if we are to do good and to be good, we have to put on kindness as easily and unselfconsciously as we dress ourselves.

“Put on the whole armor of God,” Paul wrote to the Ephesians, and if you've ever studied the history of armor, you know that the first thing you put on when you put on a suit of armor is an undergarment of cloth to protect your skin. That's the role that kindness plays in spiritual warfare. We suit up to do battle against the forces of sin in the world by dressing ourselves first of all with kindness.

How different, do you think, our society and the world would be if the characters in the drama we're seeing being played out in front of the cameras in Washington right now treated each other with kindness rather than hostility and suspicion? Isn't that how we should treat people when the most intimate details of their personal lives are dissected publicly and politically? Respect, like charity, can be cold and soulless; kindness is a warmth that can thaw even the most frigid encounters. If it's unrealistic to ask for love to be part of our politics today, could we at least ask to see a little more kindness?

Finally Micah told the people of Israel – and tells us, their spiritual descendants – to walk humbly with our God. Having drawn the circle widest in the global and cultural sphere of justice, and then having brought us closer to ourselves in the smaller, interpersonal sphere of kindness, Micah now, on behalf of God, brings us to our innermost selves and our spiritual lives – our walk with God.

Humility, like wisdom, is in short supply just now among the movers and shakers of our society. Far too many of us think we deserve a trophy just for showing up. We're told, again and again, to believe in ourselves, to trust ourselves, to have confidence in ourselves, and to take control of the room with our selves. Too many of us consider humility for those who need it.

It is said that when someone attempted to rein in Winston Churchill during one of his rants about his political opponent, Clement Attlee, by saying, “Surely, Winston, you'll admit that Mr. Attlee is a humble man,” Churchill is supposed to have responded, “Yes Attlee is a humble man, and he has a great deal to be humble about!”

Humility doesn't win elections in our country or in any other. It doesn't garner followers. It doesn't inspire confidence. We want leaders who take control of the levers of power, who make bold decisions, who leave no doubt who's in charge.

Like millions of other Americans, including, perhaps, some of you, I tune into the cooking show *Chopped* every now and then, and it never ceases to amaze me how self-deluding some of the competitors are. “I've got this,” they'll say when they just turned in a dish that the judges couldn't eat because the chicken wasn't sufficiently cooked. Really? I want to say to them through the television set. You really think under-cooked chicken makes you a *Chopped* champ? You need to add a big pinch of humility to your recipe for living.

Humility isn't about self-abasement. It's about honesty. It's about recognizing ourselves for who we genuinely are, warts and all.

Psalm 8 tells us that God has made us a little lower than the angels, and Paul says that Christ died for us even though we're sinners, and throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel are told

repeatedly that they've been chosen by God not because of their own merit, but because God loves them. To be chosen by God means that God thinks we can do the job for which we've been chosen. God considers us capable and competent. Unlike the competitors on Chopped, our confidence comes not because we believe in ourselves, but rather because God believes in us. That's why God is called faithful throughout the Bible – God is literally full of faith in us.

If God didn't believe we could do it, God would never have asked us to. God never calls us to do the impossible; God calls us to three simple things: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. That's not impossible; it's not even complicated. But it is hard. It requires commitment and it requires discernment. To do good and to be good require a degree of dedication we usually find only in the best athletes and artists. To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God require a willingness to sacrifice what we want for what God calls us to. And those “devices and desires of our own hearts” of which the Prayer Book speaks are powerful urges to keep us captive to our selves.

On this Pledge Sunday, when we have pledged our financial support of our church for next year, we have made a commitment to keep the gospel message alive in this place. Micah spoke that message about 750 years before Jesus was born, and Jesus echoed that message when he said things like, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God”; “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”; “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The gospel is one big, beautiful message, and it's our great privilege to treasure it, live it, and share it with the world around us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, on whom the life of our church ultimately depends, your support of Faith makes it possible for us to keep the gospel here, in our place and in our time. How do you put a price tag on something as precious as that?