

What the Lord Requires: A Humble Walk with God

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“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

This morning is the third and last in a series of sermons I’ve been preaching on the second half of the eighth verse of the sixth chapter of the book of Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Those of you who have been in church the past two weeks have patiently listened to me preach first about justice and then, last week, about kindness. Today, our topic is humility, a subject easily misunderstood, especially among religious people.

If I were to ask you what humility means, most of you would probably say, “Not thinking too highly of yourself,” which is certainly true. But the problem for us religious types has tended to be the opposite: we tend to think too little of ourselves. Because of our all-too-keen awareness of the pervasiveness of sin, in our individual lives and in the lives of the groups in which we live, we tend to think of ourselves as so damaged by sin that, as the prayer of confession used to put it, “there is no health in us.”

And so I hope you were paying attention as we read responsively Psalm 8, which I chose quite deliberately to introduce a service focused on walking humbly with God. That psalm speaks of three things – God, creation, and us – and its purpose is to help us see the proper relations among those three.

The psalm is a hymn praising God for creating the natural world and for making us a part of it. There is a sense of majesty that comes over the believer who considers the work of God’s hands – the language is poetic and figurative, of course, and not to be taken literally – and that handiwork includes us as part of the cosmos. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established – what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

The psalmist is doing what all great scientists have done when they peer through a telescope or through a microscope and discover awe-inspiring wonder after wonder: they are figuratively and perhaps sometimes literally driven to their knees in grateful astonishment that we are part of such an astounding and beautiful creation.

And who are we in such a vast web of life and stuff? We are a little lower in the hierarchy of being than God, with responsibility for the other living creatures with which we inhabit planet earth. To be granted dominion over God's works never meant doing whatever we please with God's creation – it still does belong to God, after all – and the proper exercise of dominion means that we get to lead but only if we are walking in God's path, laid out for us by natural and special revelation. We are creatures, to be sure, like the other creatures, but also different from them in some important ways, and we ought not to pretend that those other ways don't matter. They matter a very great deal.

And one of those ways in which we differ from God's other living creatures is our awareness of the divine or, if you prefer, the supernatural. There is no evidence we've uncovered yet that any creature on earth except humans have a sense that there is more to reality than the natural world. A beaver has no sense, as far as we can tell, of any world except the pond and the stream and the trees and the water. The beaver has no sense of that reality as having been created – creation – and thus, no sense of creation's Creator. We seem to be the only creatures aware of our own creatureliness, and aware, therefore, of our Creator. And that difference is a very, very big difference.

Because that difference is what allows the eighth verse of the sixth chapter of the book of Micah to make sense to us: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Beavers or muskrats or dinosaurs or saber-toothed cats do not do justice. We do – or at least we sometimes try to do – but the other critters don't and they won't because they can't. They are imprisoned within the walls of instinct, and even though a chimp may use a stick to dig up grubs or a rock to crack a coconut, that's not the same thing at all as coming up – or coming down – with the Ten Commandments. A chimp's intelligence is never going to give us the eighth verse of the sixth chapter of the book of Micah. God's Holy Spirit gave that insight to the human being Micah, and that same Holy Spirit gives us other human beings the insight to recognize its truth. That call from God, for us to live more than instinctually, is something that a chimp or a beaver or a blue jay will never hear.

And that's where our sense of responsibility – dominion, to use the language of Psalm 8 – comes from. It comes from the call of God. It comes from our awareness of God. And that awareness of our responsibility – our ability to respond – to God and to the world is what Micah meant, I believe, for us to walk humbly with God.

We have a place in the created world, different from the niche occupied by our fellow creatures and for which we have been uniquely fitted, and it is our job to live in that place the abundant life that Jesus promised us. That life doesn't come from us, not in its natural form and not in its spiritual form. Both are gifts from God, and when we recognize that everything we have and are is a gift, what would be a more appropriate response than grateful humility?

And when John tells us in the opening words of his gospel that all of this was created by God and God's eternal, uncreated Word whom we call Jesus the Christ, what might it mean for us to make disciples of all nations for Jesus the Christ, as we're commissioned to do in the gospel of Matthew? Does it simply mean making as many Christians as possible? That's certainly what it meant in the little

Baptist church that I grew up in, but I don't believe that anymore. The God who made and continues to make creation every single day is much larger and greater than my little religion, great as it is, and to suggest that our way is the only way is not to walk humbly with God. Rather, it seems to me, it is to say that God has to walk humbly with us.

A simple, straightforward, intellectually honest reading of the New Testament will not let me embrace a close-minded, mean-spirited, cold-hearted version of Christianity, and that's why, even though I was raised in it, I left it. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Hannah and Samuel, Mary and Elizabeth, Mahatma Gandhi, Gautama the Buddha, the prophet Mohammed – none of them were Christians and none of them are in hell because they weren't. Even as an adolescent I thought it unfair of God to create billions and billions of people over hundreds of thousands of years and then make the doorway to heaven so narrow that only a vanload could enter. Like Huck Finn on his raft, helping the slave Jim to escape, I'd rather be spiritually generous and go to hell than spend eternity obeying such a law as that.

But there's another kind of spiritual arrogance that we often overlook. When Jesus told us, echoing Deuteronomy, that we're to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, that doesn't give us the option of closing our minds and turning our backs on settled science in favor of cherry-picking fruit-loop theories and fantasies masquerading as facts from our favorite Internet site or rant radio station. The theory of evolution, for example, is the product of decades of careful, thoughtful work by legions of dedicated scientists across a variety of cultures and the political and religious spectrum, and for forty percent of Americans, most of them Christian, to deny that painstaking labor is to spit in the face of the God who has given us minds and told us to use them.

The same is true of climate change. The fact that scientists may not agree on every detail does not mean that the theory doesn't account for most of the evidence, and that evidence is mounting. Young people, who tend to be less religiously hidebound than their elders, aren't willing to shut off their minds when they come to church. The only religion that's going to make sense to them is one that takes account of the natural world as well as any spiritual world that transcends this one.

You don't walk humbly with God by walking on people, every one of whom bears God's image and likeness. You don't walk humbly with God by imperiling earth's limited supply of fresh water by taking the cheap, easy route to move crude oil. You don't walk humbly with God by writing the laws so that the haves get the goldmine and the have-nots get the shaft.

You walk humbly with God when you walk gently on the earth and walk humbly with others. You walk humbly with God when you know that yours is one of many ways to reach the ineffably divine. You walk humbly with God when you honor the sacred in everyone and everywhere, and when you defend those people, plants, animals, soils, winds, and waters whose sacredness is being violated. You walk humbly with God when you recognize that your place in history was once occupied by someone who also thought that they were part of the best of all possible worlds, and that your place in history will someday be taken by another who will think the same thing.

My dear Christian friends, one of the best ways I can urge you to heed the words of the prophet Micah about humility with God is to offer you some words from the English historian Herbert Butterfield, who said two things for which he is chiefly remembered today. The first is his recognition of the limits of moral judgments based on history. He said in an early book, "If history can do anything, it is to remind us that all our judgments are merely relative to time and circumstance." That's an expression of humility.

And the second thing that Butterfield said was to comfort Christian people of good will, just like us, who were daunted by that dispiriting historical relativism that he recognized. What he said was this: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."

And that's what I would say to you if you wish to walk humbly with God. Hold to Christ – that eternal, uncreated Word of God made flesh, who showed us how to live as incarnated beings who dwell on earth a little lower than angels – and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"