

January 29 To Love Kindness

Micah 6:8 (Contemporary English Version)

⁸The LORD God has told us what is right and what he demands: "See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern, and humbly obey your God."

The word that we translate as kindness or mercy in the Hebrew is "hesed". It is one of the richest words in the Hebrew language. There is no one English word that can convey all of the meanings of "hesed". It means love, loyalty and faithfulness. It is used to describe the key ingredients in any relationship, whether it is between friends, in a marriage or between us and God that makes the relationship meaningful and special. We can't really define it but we know deep down whether or not that something is there in a relationship. It is the difference between casual acquaintances and friendship. It is the difference between having to be with a relative and wanting to be with them. It is the difference between going through the motions in faith and having a deep and abiding connection with God. In the message version we are told that "hesed" or mercy or kindness should be our first concern.

Another way of saying this is that we need to move from attraction to affection. We all know the feeling of attraction. You meet someone for the first time and something clicks. Sometimes that is as far as it goes but often, with a little work on our part it moves to deep affection. With acquaintances, we spend some time with them, going out to lunch and doing some fun things together. We begin to open up about our hopes and fears and soon they are beloved friends. With someone with whom we have a romantic interest the same kind of journey happens, from casual first dates to long intimate times together. Is it any surprise that the same is required if we are to find "hesed" or kindness with God? To achieve this deep relationship we have to spend time with God in prayer and devotion, we have to be willing to be open and vulnerable, and we need to be willing to put some thought and energy into the relationship.

It is easy to feel attracted to God and God's word. Messages about love and forgiveness and grace draw us in. Coming to church and finding a loving

community is nice. However, it is very challenging and time consuming to move beyond those initial feelings and develop a relationship with God that is deeper and life transforming. You have to be willing to invest some of your time and resources; you have to be willing to help others. You have to be willing to learn that some of what you are doing is not okay and be willing to change. Today I want us to consider what we need to do in our walk with God, and also with others, to really love kindness.

As I thought about this it seems that Micah wants us to strive daily to live in a covenantal relationship with God. There are many meanings to a covenantal relationship, some legal and some relational. But one of the things that is most important when we consider this deeper relationship is that we need to give it time. You cannot come to feel “hesed” towards God or others without being willing to put some energy and time into the relationship.

We also have to want to do this. A covenantal relationship is one we embrace willingly. If we do it out of fear of punishment or duty, because we feel we have been forced into it, or because we think we will get something out of it, is not a life-giving relationship. There are many reasons we begin our walk with God. It might be because we were dragged along to church when we were kids. Or a friend invites us to church and we go because we don’t want to hurt their feelings. Just like falling in love we begin a relationship with God casually with no sense of commitment. Many of our interactions with others stay at this superficial level. If our relationship to God doesn’t change, faith never takes on the deeper levels of covenantal relationship. To love kindness is to ultimately fall into love with God. It requires us to take that next step and begin to enter into a covenantal relationship with God.

In thinking about this, I recall one man’s story. He promised the love of his life that he would attend church with her after they were married. Not being one to go back on his word he showed up faithfully every week. But, he admits, though his body was there, his mind was somewhere else. He used the time to think about issues he was facing at work, to plan upcoming vacations and other such things. He was not engaged but he attended. The church served a monthly

meal at the Union Gospel Mission. One month the men's group volunteered and he was asked if he would come and help out. He had never done anything like this before but agreed. Something happened that night. In helping serve and seeing the good the church was doing he suddenly realized that faith was more than showing up on Sunday. Soon he was volunteering every month at the mission, and before long, he and his wife were in charge of the meal. They held that responsibility for the next several decades. Helping there led him to start paying attention at worship because he needed to figure out why the church did this. This led to Bible studies and many other faith activities. He fell in love with others in his church, with the people at the mission, and ultimately with God. This is what it means to make mercy your first concern.

We know that the most meaningful relationships that we have are those where we enjoy being with the other individual and they, we hope, enjoy being with us. They are life-giving and life-sustaining. You nurture these relationships by spending time, sharing, listening, dreaming and working side by side. This is what God asks us to do when we love kindness and mercy. To enter into a covenant to spend time in silence before God, to listen, really listen, before responding and striving to share all that is important in our lives is challenging but also life-giving. When we respond to God in this manner we find unimaginable love.

Micah, I believe used this word "hesed" as being part of what God requires, wants, desires of us, because it naturally moves us to this kind of relationship with others as well. We need to think about what it means to extend kindness to others. Offering "hesed", loyalty and kindness and mercy to others is part of what it means to be a person of faith. It is my pet peeve that we, as a society, have lost much of this giving of kindness and mercy to others. We do not live in community with others, so many spend much of their time alone. Seniors sit at home alone. Children come home to empty houses after school. Families sit in their houses on the weekends. We are becoming a nation of lonely people and this is making us, I believe, into intolerant and angry people. When things don't go our way we get easily upset. These reactions come out of our

disconnect with some meaningful form of community. We need to see all people as part of our human family. We need to offer them “hesed”.

In thinking about this, I recall a member of one of my congregations. After her husband died she made the decision to move into a senior housing facility. She was worried about moving out of the neighborhood she had been in for years. She made the move and for several weeks, when she came to church, you could tell that she was down. Then one day she came to church, her spirits were up. She said, “I realize there were a lot of lonely people where I lived. I am trying to visit as many of them as possible. No one should feel like they are alone.” She didn’t realize it but in seeing a need in others, in working to draw them into community, by offering “hesed” she was also renewing her own spirits.

This week, think about where you can improve your relationship with someone close to you, a family member or friend. What one specific thing can you do? Before attempting this act, lift it to God as an offering, and then sit in silence waiting for God to speak. Listen for what God is telling you. This week think about one way you can improve your relationship with God. What one specific thing can you do? Lift it to God as an offering and then sit in silence waiting for God to speak.

God offers us deep covenantal relationships with others and most importantly with God. It comes from doing justice and loving mercy. May God’s “hesed”, fill you as you turn and fill others with love and mercy and peace. May God’s “hesed” fill you and grant you peace and love as you deepen your relationship with our beloved God.