

February 5 - To Walk Humbly

Micah 6:6-8

Today we end this series on Micah. Even though he was an Old Testament prophet his words resonate with much of the teachings of Jesus and they are still very relevant for us. Today I want us to examine the last part of his challenge, "To walk humbly with God."

Humbly is a word that we rarely use and usually would not want applied to us. Some synonyms of this word are submissively, subserviently; fearfully, timidly; and self-deprecatingly. If this was what Micah meant then he is implying that a person of faith is one who is in the background, who is fearful to make a stand and sees themselves as less than others. That certainly is not what he meant. The Hebrew word that we translate humbly can also mean carefully or circumspectly. To get at what Micah meant we have to take that word humbly and add to it the work "walk" which is the key word in Micah 6:8.

The prophet Micah, when he asked the question, "What does the Lord require of you?" wanted his listeners, and us as well, to think about how we respond to God's love towards each of us. In earlier sermons we talked about the importance of kindness and justice and today we are challenged to walk daily with God humbly or, maybe more correctly, intentionally asking God to guide our steps. To walk humbly means that we are to be careful to put God's will first in our action, realizing that it is easy to get off the path if we are not careful. We are to live in conformity with God's purpose for us because without intention it is so easy to go astray. Micah wanted us to envision a way of life, a way of relating to God, and to the people around us, that was pleasing and acceptable to God. Using the word "walk" in his answer tells me that he wanted us to imagine our faith as if we are on a journey with God. This image for me is really helpful.

Another way of looking at this is to think about the idea of pilgrimage. Almost all faith groups embrace the concept of pilgrimage. It is a walk, often to a Holy Site, that also signifies a spiritual journey of the soul. For Muslims the Haj is such a journey. Jews strive to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem at least once during their lifetime. Christians have undertaken pilgrimages from almost the beginning. People, to this day, still make pilgrimages to Lourdes, and the Camino de Santiago trail in Spain has long been such a pilgrimage path. To be a pilgrim is to intentionally walk with God. For just a moment think about being a pilgrim. You are intentionally traveling for and with God in all that you do. What would that mean? For Micah, he believed that one who is undertaking such a pilgrim walk would be one that learns

to act justly and with mercy or kindness at all times. And we are to do this in humility which for me means, in part, that we do it in such a way that the focus is on God and not on us.

As we examine the call to humility in our faith walk we need to realize that even though I have preached about each of these three as separate ideas you don't get to separate them, as far as Micah is concerned. You don't get to say I will work on being "kind" and hope the rest happens. You don't get to embrace justice issues with no regard to how they affect others. We have to learn how to walk in faith doing all three all of the time. Wow, what a challenge.

Do you see what I mean when I say that it is harder than we want to admit to walk with Jesus each day? When we add to this the idea of doing it humbly, thinking always of how what we are doing is for God and to give God the glory, it takes on even more weight. It means, at least in part, that we are to live our faith in such a way that our actions speak for us. The best way to do this is to truly see our lives as being lived in community with all people, not just those like us. It is trying to live as if God were a constant companion that we share our days with, telling our joys and concerns to, and sharing our hopes and dreams with. It is seeing each person as a brother or sister whom we deeply love and do not tolerate them being treated poorly.

Now I am the first to admit that the idea of walking with God in faith is an often overused image. We sing, "and he walks with me and he talks with me" or "where he leads me I will follow." We read the poem Footprints and get all warm and tingly at the thought that Jesus is right beside us, waiting to carry us when things get tough. These images are reassuring, and they are meant to be, but this is not what Micah had in mind when he talked about walking with God as being part of what God requires of each of us. Micah is talking about a much tougher kind of walk with God. It is a walk that challenges us each day to be completely faithful. When we walk with God in the way Micah was imagining the walk, it is as much about God prodding us, scolding us, and cajoling us into faithful actions as it is about God supporting us, forgiving us and loving us. Both are needed. It is a walk that causes us to ask, "What does it mean to be faithful and how does a faithful person live?" It gets us asking, "What does God require from us?" We already know the answer, at least for Micah. It has to do with being kind and seeking for justice with humility.

Micah's image of a daily walk with God is much more difficult than we might want to admit. Over a hundred years ago Charles Sheldon wrote a little book called "In His Steps." It has gained a recent upsurge in popularity. The book details the events in a small Midwestern church where the pastor challenged the members to try and live by the admonition: "What

would Jesus Do?” Over the next year a small group of the church people tried to live this way, encountering many struggles as well as joys. What the book points out is that it is much harder to live each day by the principles of Jesus than we might imagine. Yet isn't it funny that a book that so challenged people to live faithfully became a cliché of modern marketing. You saw W.W.J.Y. bracelets and book marks and other things all over the place for a while. You had people saying, “What would Jesus do?” about all sorts of events. It made it seem so easy, ask the question and then do whatever pops into your head and proclaim you are being a faithful disciple. But asking, “What would Jesus do?” is so much more than this. It is so hard to be faithful in walking daily with the Lord. In fact, I find it almost impossible at times to truly know what Jesus would have me do, at least in certain situations.

Micah's pronouncement continually makes me ask: What would it mean each day to try to live every moment doing what Jesus would have me do? What things would I have to do differently? What would I have to give up? What areas of my life would I have to strive even harder to improve? Where do I need to make sure God gets the credit? All of this is part of what it means to walk humbly with God. It means doing things, not for credit or praise, but out of conviction. It means living in such a way that justice issues are a central part of my life and kindness and mercy are given freely to all.

How do you live as Micah challenges us? Part of the way to keep ourselves grounded and God in the center of our actions is to be silent. Most of us forget the importance of quiet listening as we try and to discern God's will for us. We need to remember that 50% of communication is quiet listening. This is part of our walk. The importance of listening is that we don't always know what to do or how to respond, at least in the beginning. A friend unjustly accuses you of being insensitive and hurtful to her and others at a meeting. You know that she has totally misunderstood your actions but you also are aware that if you try to defend your actions it will seem to all as if you are in a state of denial. What is your response? What would Jesus have you do? Do you remain silent and take the unjust criticism and move on? Do you defend your actions because you see a bigger issue? Do you work for reconciliation? Do you offer forgiveness even if the other doesn't accept it?

I was chair of the personnel committee of one of our camps. The director and wife were good friends of mine. Each year I was tasked with doing an evaluation of their work. Over a period of a couple of years it became apparent that their effectiveness was diminishing. The personnel committee finally wrote them up stating the things that needed to change in the coming year if they were to continue to be employed. Since he was a fellow clergy person I had to send a copy to the bishop in case next year he would need an

appointment. We also provided opportunities for coaching from other successful camp directors. A few days after the meeting I received a blistering letter from him that, among other things, told me how he thought we were friends, implying a friend would never do this. He and his wife began a yearlong campaign to keep their jobs, not by trying to improve but by getting all their friends to challenge the board. A year later the camp was in worse straits financially and none of our required tasks were accomplished by the two of them so we voted to fire them. This was subject to the approval of the corporate annual meeting made up of representatives of each United Methodist Church in the area. Though there were 38 official representatives, we were usually lucky to get the bare minimum for doing business which was 12. That year there were over 100 at the meeting. Most came as friends of the manager demanding time to speak. For several hours we heard how wonderful the couple was and how misguided the personnel committee was. Before the vote on them we were asked if we had anything we wished to say. What would you have done? What would Jesus have done? What would it mean to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly? One of our members, without talking to us, stood up and said what I believe was the absolute correct response. She said, "Obviously there is a difference of opinion here. We are going to take a vote in a moment and I don't want it to become divisive. If you wish to retain the couple because you believe the work of the committee is in error, please do so. The committee will then offer our resignations so a new personnel committee, supportive of the couple, can be put in place. Search your heart and if you vote for them also accept taking on this task. We, who are on the committee, will continue to support the camp, but not in leadership." She looked at us and we all shook our heads in agreement. Here was justice and kindness and humility. The couple was retained, we resigned. Two years later the conference removed the couple because things had gotten so bad at the camp. We could have gloated and said, "I told you so", but instead we offered to work with the new manager in saving the camp for the kids.

It is hard to know what to do when it comes to trying to live a faithful life in the world where injustice and ignoring the needs of the poor are acceptable practices. How do we live with kindness and justice in such a land? I struggle with that thought and I hope you do too. I hope you are sitting in quiet listening, discerning God's will for you around these tough issues. I believe that it is in our struggle with being faithful that we are walking with God in a way that Micah hoped all who love God would embark.

"What does God require of me as I relate to God and others on my journey of faith?" It is a good question for each of us to focus on this day and every day.