

There's a joke that has made its way around the internet about summarizing the Old Testament in 5 sentences. It starts with God saying to the people of Israel: "You are my people, and you should not do these things." The people say: "Ok. We won't do those things." God says: "Good." Then the people say "God, we did the things." And God says "C'mon you guys!" And then it repeats over and over - God reminding the people that they are God's people and telling them what it means to be in right relationship with God, the people apologizing for not being in right relationship and promising to do better. God being pleased with their renewed sense of covenant. The people messing it up, and God being upset. Repeat. It's simplistic and funny, but it's also kind of true.

This morning we are hearing the words of the prophet Micah. And yet again the people of Israel have strayed from their covenant relationship with God. The kingdom of Israel has been split into the Northern Kingdom called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom called Judah. During Micah's time, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire and became one of its provinces. The Assyrians continued to push south and Micah witnessed devastation in the Southern kingdom as well. Many prophets only spoke to one of the kingdoms, either Israel or Judah, but Micah speaks to both nations. His general message is the same as all the prophets: you are not living in ways that please God, watch out, because of your lack of faithfulness, something bad will happen. But like most prophets, Micah also brings a message of hope and God's continued faithfulness.

Through Micah, God engages in a dialogue with the people about their damaged, but not broken, relationship. God reminds them of just some of the things God has done for them. The ways in which God continued in steadfast love and faithfulness to be with God's people in the most difficult circumstances. It appears that the people get it. They understand that they have messed up, again. But how on earth can they even begin to repair the damage they have done? Using their old framework of sacrifice, they wonder what they could possibly sacrifice to restore their relationship with God. Should they make burnt offerings with yearling calves? Would thousands of rams be a big enough gesture? Or maybe thousands of rivers of oil? If that's not enough, what about sacrificing their first-born child? Surely that would show the depth of their commitment.

But God doesn't want any of that. In verse 8, Micah reminds the that being in covenant with God is not a transactional process. God isn't seeking payment for the love and grace God gives their people. One of the most popular verses of scripture Micah 6:8 reads like this in the New Revised Standard Version: "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?" That word require can trip us up

sometimes. It sounds like God is saying “do these things or else!” The Hebrew word that is translated into English as “require” is the word “darash.” There are some subtle nuances of this word that are worth exploring. The Rev. James C. Howell puts it this way:

“‘Require’ misses the heart of it, I think, for we resort to notions of rules or grading, as in “the teacher requires you turn in a three-page paper by Friday.” The verb darash has undertones of affection, or the healthiest sort of dependency, as in “the child requires his mother’s love,” or “the flower requires rain and sunshine.” There is a mood of seeking in darash; lovers seek each other out, and a shepherd seeks his lost sheep—and in the Old Testament, both situations use darash. So when the Lord “requires” justice, kindness and mercy, it isn’t that the Lord “insists on” or “demands” these things. God seeks them, yearns for them, and frankly needs them from us as intimate partners in God’s adventure down here.¹

This whole text is about God yearning for right-relationship with her people and for the people to do the same for each other. Much like a good and loving parent looks at the relationship between them and their children as well as the relationship between their children. What does God require of us? To act with justice, kindness and humility. Seems like a pretty small request when compared to thousands of rivers of oil or thousands of rams. But we fail at it so miserably as human beings. Especially when we look beyond our interpersonal relationships and apply these yearnings of God for society as a whole.

Where is the justice for shooting victims 20 years after the shooting at Columbine High School and 6 years after the shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, and 2 years after the shooting at Pulse Nightclub and 1 year after the shooting in Las Vegas and 2 weeks after the shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue and days after the shooting at Borderline Bar and Grill in Ten Thousand Oaks? Justice here doesn’t necessarily mean punishment or consequences for the shooters. The shooters have all experienced consequences in one form or another. But rather how are we as a nation doing justice when people keep dying but nothing changes? When the CDC isn’t even allowed to study gun violence as a national health crisis?

Where is the loving kindness when people are fleeing a country like Honduras which has one of the worst rates of murders against women in the world, and our response is to meet them with barbed wire and soldiers?

¹ <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2012/06/13/qa-unpacking-the-message-of-micah-68/>

Where is the humility when leaders deny scientific evidence of climate change putting millions of lives at risk, blaming the massive fires in California not on the years of drought and changing climate conditions, but on not managing forests properly?

God isn't interested in punishment when we as individuals or as a society screw up. God wants to restore relationship. To being healing. To reconnect us to each other and remind us that we are all God's beloveds. "O my people" God says in verse 5. O my people, remember all the good things I have done for you. God reminds us that God has always been there and that God will always be there, yearning, seeking, desiring that we see the errors of our ways and turn to back to the ways of God. Are we up for the task? Let us close with the words of Micah 6:8 using the Message translation

"But God's already made it plain how to live, what to do,
what God is looking for in all people.
It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,
be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don't take yourself too seriously — take God seriously."

May it be so.