

Building Up the Household of God: What is Good?

Micah 5:2-4a, 6:6-8

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He was supposed to be the one. His father had dubious morals, but he was supposed to be the one. He built a wall, a wall that saved the people from an invading force. He was supposed to be the one. He made sure that a huge pipeline was built that protected his people from dependence on others. He was supposed to be the one.

But he sacrificed the little people — their communities that hailed his rise to power — so that the mighty and the powerful could be saved. He had a dubious relationship with a great northern superpower. Some even said he colluded with them. He certainly funneled money to them. His name was Hezekiah and he was the king who tried to do the right thing.

His father, Ahaz, was a terrible king. He had entered into a vassal state relationship with the Assyrian Empire, but it meant he had also set up temples in Jerusalem to the Assyrian gods. He had actually made one of his sons undergo the Assyrian trial by fire, which many called child sacrifice. It's all there in Second Kings. Ahaz was awful, and Hezekiah tried to do the right thing.

Hezekiah did good. He cleared out the old temples to the Assyrian gods. There is actual archeological evidence of the temples that were disassembled and buried under new foundations. And when the region began to revolt against the Assyrians, Hezekiah prepared. He built that wall and a lot of towers to make the city of Jerusalem — then with 25,000 inhabitants — safe from attack. He had workers carve out a great pipeline, a tunnel actually, to the well at Siloam, so that if the city were ever put to siege, they wouldn't lose water. And it all worked. When the Assyrian leader came tearing through Judah, after having crushed the kingdom of Israel a few years before, Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, tried as he might, but he could not conquer Jerusalem.

However, to accomplish this, Hezekiah sacrificed more than 45 fortified small cities in Judah including, most scholars agree, the small town in southern Judah (where Micah was from) and the small town just outside of Jerusalem, Bethlehem. Also, Hezekiah, while he got the people to worship in Yahweh's temple again, didn't push the elites of the city to change their ways. So, they didn't just sacrifice the little people of the small towns — the haves were taking advantage of the have-nots before, during and after the siege of Jerusalem.

Then, the prophet Micah shows up and puts them on trial. He charges them with exploiting the poor, making a great show of their faith, and he mocks their anticipated response: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn?" Notice how he starts with what the temple law requires and gets more and more ridiculous? Rivers of oil and child sacrifice?

You see Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, had been practicing child sacrifice to honor the Assyrian gods. So, like a good advocate, Micah traps the people in their own showy, unfaithful injustice. And he tells them in words that have practically become the number one bumper sticker faith proclamation — do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. But what does that look like? Many disagree what justice looks like. Loving kindness, which here is actually “do steadfast love,” sounds kind of vague. And humility with God — who wouldn’t be humble before the maker of the Universe?

But what if doing justice means letting go of our way and seeking the way of God’s Gracing Justice, justice that seeks restoration, not victory or punishment? What if Doing Steadfast Love is having the same kind of loving patience that God has shown for God’s people through time, never giving up on us, never letting anything we do ultimately break the gentle tether of love? What if walking humbly is not simply acknowledging the unfathomable bigness of God, but it is also recognizing those times and places where we try to play God, believing we have power over the lives of others, believing we get to decide who is worthy and unworthy, believing we get to be judge of the universe, or our small corner of it? How does adopting these three principles make us encounter the world differently?

There’s a story that kept coming back to me this week as I thought about these three ways of being and doing the right thing— doing the loving thing, doing the humble thing. I honestly can’t remember if I’ve told you this story before, but if I have, it bears repeating. It all started with Dave Meyer. Dave lives in Grayslake, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. In the 2014 Boston Marathon he wasn’t inspired by the amazing comeback of the city from the 2013 tragedy at that race. The fact was, he was having a terrible race — slow, painful and disappointing. As he neared mile 26, he just wanted to be done, get it over with, until he saw the man. He had seen things like this before, someone who has run their body into the ground, miscalculating and facing collapse. Dave could see it was happening to the man just ahead of him. As he passed him, he looked back and he could see a look of determination. But the man’s legs began to falter. “At that point, my time didn’t make any difference to me. I knew how important it was that I finish, so I knew it was important that he finish.” So Dave caught him and lifted him, supporting him on one side.

They were both so sweaty and tired, it wasn’t working. Dave was going to fall with the man he was trying to help. And that’s when Texan Jim Grove, at his 10th Boston Marathon saw them. Jim was having an awful race too. It was the hardest marathon he had ever run, and he didn’t know why. But he saw the two men about to fall and his terrible race fell away as he rushed forward to lift the falling man from the other side. And they continued on, three exhausted men together. A half mile short of the finish line it was all too much. The runner who was on his last legs suddenly had no legs at all and they stopped.

Mike Johnson from Stillwater, Minnesota had run 20 marathons but 2013 was his first in Boston and in that fateful race, he was stopped less than a half mile from the end due the bombings. This time, NOTHING was going to stop him from finishing; then he saw the three men. At the same time, Kathy Goodwin from Seattle was passing them on the other side, near the end of her hardest marathon — a miserable, terrible race she was going to finish and forget forever, if she could get through it without throwing up. Something motivated her to stop and ask if she could help.

Within seconds, Johnson and Goodwin were holding up the man by his legs and the five of them were making their way to the finish line. The cheers were deafening. The leaders had finished a long time ago but some of the loudest cheers of the race happened for these five. When they were a block or so away, the man said, "Let me walk it; I can do it." And the five separated and walked across the line — and have never spoken since. But on that day, what they did mattered. Oh, it didn't make the man win the race, but it meant they all got to finish. Humility won, loving kindness won, and the justice of "everyone gets to finish today" won. Any one of them could have not done it, and none of them could have done it alone. But each of them could do something. And together, they could and did do something faithful, humble and beautiful.

That's my continuing hope for all of us, for our common ministry together — that we will find ways when we encounter a stumbling sister or brother, or a community that has been exhausted by injustice or exploitation, or fellow-travelers who have given their all and can go no further — that we will live a justice-seeking gospel that says everyone finishes this race of life with dignity, respect, love and grace. And so we put all of our gifts — our time, our passions, or expertise, our money — to the use of the lifting up of all in the name of the Risen One.

That day in Boston, they had to make room for one another and for what they could do together. As a result, they brought more than one man to the finish line; they brought hope and joy for all. If one of them had clung to a selfish desire for personal success; if one of them had been so focused on the task at hand that she didn't see the others; if one had seen only an advantage, a chance to finish higher, exploiting the weaknesses of these runners for his own advantage — this beautiful finish would not have been.

Can we, as we make our commitments for 2019, make another commitment today — as we welcome a beloved brother into the church, as we seek to build up the Household of God — to not be blinded by the busy-ness, the master plans, the worthy goals, the demands of our daily slog? Can we commit to be ever-attentive to the needs around us? Can we surrender our well-made and well-intentioned plans when the good of all, or perhaps even just the good of one, needs it?

Our history says we can, and we have. The weekly church calendar shows that we can, and we do. The lives that you are lifting up each month in the ministries we support from Africa to around the corner says we are — right now, even when we don't know it. So let us dedicate ourselves anew to willingly take on the judgment imposed by God through Micah in that imaginary trial so long ago — affirmed again and again in the life and ministry of the One from Bethlehem, the One whose Advent is but three weeks away, the One whose gospel is alive right now in this place and wherever the spirit journeys with us when we leave here.

Yes, let us take on the sentence of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God, and we may yet find that the one who is lifted up, the one who is able to go on when it seems impossible is none other than ourselves. Thanks be to God.