

July 8, 2018  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Alternate Path”

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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them.

Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

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?

Reflection by: Sandy Ammon

I don't really remember the first time that I heard this passage, which probably means that it was during a normal Sunday church service, but it has managed to stick with me. It certainly packs a lot into a short statement! The Lord's REQUIREMENTS – already kind of scary. First, to seek justice. As a child of the 60's and 70's, social justice has always been very important to me, and one of the things that drew me to this "Church with a Conscience." When I sent my Bible passage request to Pastor Amy, she responded that this is a "defining passage," for this congregation, which was not a surprise to me.

Next, to love kindness. At my first Theology on Tap discussion, Pastor Melanie asked us what people would say about us at our funeral, or at least what we hope they would say. What came to me was that I hoped they would say I was kind, or as Pastor Melanie put it "that she treated others with grace." Recently my favorite meme on Facebook is one that says "In a world where you can be anything, be kind."

Finally, Micah instructs us to "walk humbly with our God." Thinking about walking WITH God makes it easy to feel humble. However, remembering that we are all children of God, and have that little sparkle of divinity within us makes it a lot harder. Treating others justly, kindly and walking with them on their journey is a great beginning to loving one another, which is also a tough command.

My yoga instructor always stresses that we are practicing yoga, setting goals to work towards. No one is expected to be perfect. I don't think Micah expected us to be perfect either but does suggest that we keep moving in the right direction. Also at yoga, we end our practice by greeting each other with "Namaste," which means the Divine in me honors the Divine in you. I will close with that to all of you – Namaste.

## *The Alternate Path*

Chimamanda Adichie is a novelist who grew up in a middle-class family in Nigeria. At the age of nineteen, she came to the United States to go to college. One of the first questions her American roommate asked was how she learned to speak English so well. The roommate was surprised to learn that English is the official language of Nigeria. When the same roommate asked Adichie if she could listen to her “tribal music,” she was disappointed when Adichie put in a tape of Mariah Carey. Adichie quickly realized that her roommate had a single story of Africa, and it was a story of catastrophe – tribalism, drought, civil war, AIDS and because of this single story, this limited story, Adichie’s roommate could not imagine connecting with Adichie as an equal; instead, she looked at her with a kind of well-meaning pity.

But Adichie has also found herself on the other side of the single story. A few years ago, she traveled to Mexico. At the time, most of what she knew about Mexico came from the American media, and nearly all the stories were about immigration, Mexicans illegally crossing the border, fleecing the healthcare system, taking jobs no one else wanted, that kind of thing. On her first day in Guadalajara, she walked around in shock, watching people going to work, selling tortillas in the marketplace, laughing, smoking, talking, living. Adichie was overwhelmed with shame to realize that in her mind, all Mexicans had been reduced to one thing: the abject immigrant.<sup>1</sup>

We are all susceptible to the danger of a single story a single story about a person, an institution, even an entire country. Fortunately, one of the many gifts of our religious tradition is the diversity of stories at our disposal, stories that help us grasp, as fully as we can, who God is and who God calls us to be. We have stories in the Hebrew Bible of people who answered God’s call: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, Moses, and Miriam, Eli and Samuel and Hannah. Each of these characters reveals to us a different facet of who God is and what it looks like to be in a relationship with God. We also have the stories of prophets and kings, and of ordinary people like Esther and Job and Ruth and Naomi.

Each story teaches us something about God, and all these stories protect us against the danger of thinking we can know God through our experience alone

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

or through any single story. When we factor in the stories of the New Testament, our understanding of God grows larger still. Imagine how limited our understanding of Jesus would be if we had only one gospel instead of four, or how much less wisdom we would have about what it means to be the church if we only had one letter from the apostle Paul instead of eleven letters to nine different churches.

The prophet Micah was well aware of the danger of a single story, especially the danger of a single story about God. Throughout this book, Micah is deeply critical of religious leaders who only tell one story – especially since, according to Micah, they are only telling the story the people want to hear, a story that says that as God’s chosen people, all they have to do atone for their mistakes is come to worship and offer certain sacrifices. Micah emphatically preaches that this story is a lie – being God’s chosen people doesn’t release you from responsibility for your behavior. Furthermore, coming to worship or making material sacrifices is not a sufficient act of repentance or allegiance to God.

Micah is clear that the story of God and God's relationship with humanity is not a transactional story where the people do good and get rewarded or do bad and get punished. Instead, Micah reveals that the story of God’s chosen people and that includes us! – is a story of transformation. And transformation is anything but simple: it is a process; a dynamic, evolving, life-long process filled with unexpected twists and turns and unanticipated joys and sorrows and many difficult choices.

The verse that Sandy chose from Micah is not only the best-known verse from this book, but it is also one of the best-known and best-loved verses in the Bible. In part, this is because this verse so clearly and succinctly states what our journey with God requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. This command is much harder to fulfill than the people were hoping for. They wanted Micah to tell them what to do: where and when to show up for worship, how much and what to submit for an offering. Instead, Micah gives this command that is not a one-time transaction but a lifelong transformation of our very lives.

The strongest shape in nature is the triangle because any added force is shared equally among the three sides; in other words, a triangle is a shape that refuses to adhere to a single story. Although I have preached on this verse before, in

preparing for this sermon, what struck me this time is that the requirement is trinitarian. The doctrine of the Trinity protects us from the temptation of telling a single story about God it reminds us that God is not just creator, but redeemer and sustainer; God is not just Father (or Mother), but Son and Spirit.

Likewise, Micah's seemingly simple formulation: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God is all the more powerful and transformative because of how each command is informed by the other two.

We cannot live faithfully through justice alone our relentless pursuit of justice must be tempered with kindness and humility. But kindness alone, without justice and humility, would be vacuous; just as humility alone would render us ineffective if our humility is not in service to justice and kindness. At the recent Harvard Divinity School commencement ceremony two student speakers challenged the audience to bring more intentionality to their life together on campus, especially in the classroom. It's not enough, they said, to simply bring together a diverse community. In and of itself, diversity is certainly a form of justice; all we have to do is look at God's creation, including humanity, to recognize that God values difference. But getting people with diverse backgrounds and identities in a room together is not the same as the justice Micah calls for. True biblical justice requires us to develop practices that overcome entrenched patterns of hierarchy that privilege some voices over others.<sup>2</sup>

But in any community, and especially in the church, we can't just say we are welcoming or check the box of diversity and count that as having done justice. We must temper justice with the kindness that moves us to include voices that we may otherwise overlook and with the humility that enables us to talk less and listen more to those who have not always been included.

The novel *Wonder* tells the story of a ten-year-old boy named Auggie who was born with a severe facial deformity. In his first ten years, Auggie has had dozens of surgeries to improve his breathing and his hearing. In part because of all the time he has spent in and out of hospitals, Auggie has been homeschooled, but his parents have decided that,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/our-practices-keep-our-commitments-alive>

as he prepares to enter fifth grade, it's time for him to attend school with his peers. On the first day of school, Auggie's homeroom teacher, Mr. Brown, writes on the board what he calls a precept, a rule for life. Mr. Brown will offer his class lots of great precepts throughout the year, but the one he gives them on that first day when none of the students are quite sure about Auggie, is of utmost importance: "When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind."

This book and the movie based on it spawned a whole industry of products branded with the words "Choose kind." Now, there is nothing wrong with encouraging people to choose kindness, especially middle schoolers, but of course, kindness alone is not always particularly helpful. What Auggie longs for is not just that his peers will treat him with kindness, because in his experience, kindness is often accompanied with pity. What Auggie wants is for other kids to see him for who he is, which is way more than just what his face looks like. He has all the hopes and fears and dreams and challenges of a regular ten-year-old boy, along with a few additional ones unique to him. Auggie wants his peers to choose kindness, but he really wants them to temper that kindness with justice that recognizes him as their equal and humility that believes he might just have something to teach them.

Now I know that "temper kindness with justice and humility" doesn't work quite as well on a t-shirt, but it gets us closer to what Micah calls for kindness that is not condescending or pitying, but that is modeled after God's steadfast, unending, unconditional love that recognizes the inherent value in every person.

Recognizing that every person has inherent value is itself a radical act of humility. Humility is not about denigrating yourself or thinking less of yourself, which is perhaps why Micah's command to humility is paired with action: walking with God. Humility that is little more than self-flagellation can be paralyzing, but walking with God requires the awareness that before we have done anything, God values and loves us, but not uniquely so, for God values and loves all of God's children.

The command to walk humbly is a call to be active, not passive. A colleague of mine suggested this definition of humility: humility is refusing to participate in systems of hierarchy. So an active humility calls us to recognize that everyone

around us, no matter how different or how much less valued they might be according to all our cultural hierarchies, that everyone has something to teach us. This is humility tempered with justice and kindness.

Today, as you consider this command to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, which aspect resonates most deeply with you? Which one of these do you find easiest to do? Do you focus on kindness at the expense of justice? Do you focus on the fight for justice, but without the humility that recognizes even people who need justice have something to teach you? Does your humility lead you to walk closely with God, but leave you hesitant to take action?

The good news is that none of us is called to fulfill this command alone. When Micah asks and answers this question, What does the Lord require of you? He is not talking to an individual; he is talking to all of God's people, he is talking to all of us.

Which means that fulfilling this command is something we are called to do together, in the community. We are called as a church to hold each other accountable to the justice, kindness, and humility Micah describes, which will be for all of us a lifelong transformative process.

Together, we can help each other find ways to weave the work of justice with the gift of kindness and with the humility to walk alongside God, who holds us and all the world together in unbreakable bonds of love. Amen.

Prayer by Mindy Stewart

Holy One,

As we have heard through your prophets today, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly is all you require of us, and yet we fail on a regular basis. We mistreat those who are different from us, we fear standing up for what we believe is right, we think ill thoughts of and speak malice to others, and we put ourselves in a position of casting judgment and walking with a boastful heart, elevating ourselves above others. And yet, you continue to love us and show us your hand of mercy, and your heart of compassion. Thank you, for forgiving us, Lord, when we know exactly what we do.

While we worship you in the heat of this sanctuary, we think of those who are fighting wildfires in the west. Lord, in your mercy, Quench the fires with rain and restore the lives of those impacted. As we sit here with friends and family around us, we pray for those whose lives have been forever altered by immigration, violence, sickness, loneliness, and death. Remind us Lord to be grateful for the life you have given us, that we may not take for granted the abundance of your kindness, but always be willing and eager to share it with others. While our children and grandchildren are accounted for, we pray for those who are earnestly awaiting the safe return of the youth trapped in a cave in Thailand. God, hear their prayers. From communities around the world to those in our backyard, we pray for your spirit to descend, providing healing, forgiveness, compassion, comfort, and wholeness. We especially pray for those in our immediate family of faith including Jane & Ted, Judy, Akeya, Paul, Rob, Marlene and William, Chick, Lise, Paul, Cathy, Craig, Les, Greg, Barbara, Elizabeth, Kellen,, Alex, Ward, Sue, Liam & Emilee, June, and Gabriel. We pray for those who have found this space to be a safe place of refuge throughout the week, requesting prayer through the Carpenters Box including cancer patients Cynthia, Pat, Tom, and Janet, and for healing and comfort for Joseph, Michelle, Randall, and Sally. Lord, thank you for the men and women who are caring for these patients and others at the local hospitals, continue to give them the strength and support they need to fulfill your calling on their life. We pray for those are homebound and suffering from loneliness and depression. Help them know there is hope in you. Today and every day as we listen to the ringing of the prayer bell we keep those whose lives have been affected by gun violence close to our hearts.

From the rising of the sun to its setting, we proclaim your name is to be praised for the compassion, joy, wholeness, inclusion, and Love that you bring to all who encounter you, and we pray you will make us instruments of your peace, vessels of your kindness, doers of your Justice, and humble servants of your kingdom. For it is by you and for you that we live and breathe, experience your transformative freedom through the faith of your redeeming love, work together to bring heaven on earth, and with our many voices pray the words you taught us to pray, Our Father...