

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: Micah 6:1-8

What Does the Lord Require?

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Children's Sabbath Sunday

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It's Children's Sabbath Sunday. What are we supposed to do with that? Well, quite simply ... we are called to respond to the needs of children ... the children who are a part of our lives here in this church as well as to those children out there in the world who have no one to advocate for them ... who stand alone ... defenseless ... in a world that sometimes uses them as commodities ... as soldiers ... as slaves ... even as sex objects.

It's not a nice subject ... it leaves a bad taste in your mouth ... no one really wants to think about it or talk about it. But it's there ... even here in DeKalb County ... even here in Decatur ... there are children who are neglected ... who are emotionally and physically abused ... who are molested ... who are sexually exploited. They are victims ... victims of a society that often prefers to ignore them. It's a sad and hard to hear ... but each day in America ... every day ...

1	mother dies in childbirth
4	children are killed by abuse or neglect
5	children or teens commit suicide
8	children or teens are killed by firearms
76	babies die before their first birthday
182	children are arrested for violent crimes
366	children are arrested for drug abuse
390	babies are born to mothers who received late or no prenatal care
860	babies are born at low birth weight
1186	babies are born to teen mothers
1707	babies are born without health insurance
1887	public school students are corporally punished
2171	babies are born into poverty
2341	babies are born to mothers who are not high school graduates
2455	children are confirmed as abused or neglected
2539	high school students drop out
3742	babies are born to unmarried mothers
4440	children are arrested
17042	public school students are suspended (Children's Defense Fund)

Those are just statistics for this country ... now multiply that with the rest of the world and you can see that many children ... near and far ... are in need of help. For most children in this world ... growing up is filled with love and compassion and hope. Unfortunately, for so many others ... they may never experience any of that. And though we may be moved to want to do something about those terrible statistics. . . to attempt to put an end to childhood abuse and poverty and disease ... the sad fact is ... we can't do it all.

It's way too big of a job for this little church to do. I am not telling you all of this to make you

feel bad this morning ... or to put a guilt trip on you and make you open up your pocketbooks and wallets even wider ... I'm not trying to shame you or blame you. No ... I've mentioned all of those difficult-to-hear facts to actually bring you a message of hope today ... a message of hope that starts here ... at this fount ... and it will change the world ... at least a little part of it ... and that's all we're being asked to do.

A long time ago, a prophet named Micah brought a harsh warning to the people of Judea ... clean up your act or God is going to smite you. Like a scene out of a courtroom drama from *Law & Order*, God, the prosecutor, is throwing charge after charge against the defendant ... or defendants ... the Jewish people.

It seems they have broken the covenant God established with them ... time and time and time again. Their rulers are corrupt ... the rich have stolen from the poor. Micah reminds the people that God has always kept up his part of the bargain ... but they have failed miserably. And punishment is on the way.

But then ... as God seems to so often do ... as a parent might mitigate angry punishment to his or her misbehaving child ... God offers the people another chance. And ... God offers the same chance to us, as well. Listen now with your heart ... God is speaking to all of us from the sixth chapter of Micah, verses 1-8.

6:1 Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

6:2 Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

6:3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

6:4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

6:5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord."

6:6 "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?

6:7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

6:8 He 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?

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is a special and holy day in the life of this church ... and in the life of Benjamin Spee. Benjamin, a child of God, will be baptized in just a few minutes. And in that act of water dripping down over Benjamin's head ... God will affirm to us what God has already done ... claimed Benjamin as one of his own ... a child of God.

God doesn't just start loving Benjamin today ... because even before Jon and Arianne were aware that he was conceived ... God loved him ... and God will always love him ... claiming him ... walking with him as he grows ... and reminding Benjamin in so many ways ... that God is present in his life.

There is no stronger covenant of love. God will share this wonderful knowledge of the covenant through the caring and loving hands of Benjamin's parents who have promised to raise their son in a Christian home ... nurturing him ... providing for his daily needs ... and leading him to know his Savior, Jesus Christ. God will also share this wonderful knowledge of the covenant with Benjamin through the caring and loving hands of his family ... his grandparents and other relatives ... who have already raised their children in God's love ... and who will now share in this journey of faith with their grandson.

And God will share this wonderful knowledge of the covenant with Benjamin through the caring hands of each of you ... the members of this church ... who will promise before God in a few moments to also walk with Benjamin in the love and light of Christ... offering Benjamin a place where he will grow in his faith journey by sharing and mentoring him throughout his youth.

This is a day of joy and hope ... not just for Benjamin ... but for every child of God ... every child of God in this entire world. Because this day brings hope to the world.

To be honest ... when Benjamin is baptized ... it will not solve the horrible problems of children I highlighted at the beginning of this sermon. But who is to say what this single baptism ... this act of commitment ... will mean to this world? What effect will the ripples from the waters of this baptism do when they reach the other side of the world?

You see ... this church has made a firm commitment to share the love of Christ with children and youth. And every time we do that ... visibly in the church by stirring those waters ... every time an adult stands as a mentor with a confirmand ... every time one of you sits downstairs and teaches a Sunday School class ... every time one of you picks up a neighborhood carload of kids and brings them to church ... every time a member of this church bends down and welcomes a bewildered child into our midst ... every time one of you helps to organize an event like a Fall Festival that fills our grounds with laughter and fellowship ... every time the love of Christ is shown here to our youth ... it is going to produce ripple upon ripple in the journeys of faith of countless young people who, by the grace of God ... will do their part in helping all children ... every child in this world ... find the love and compassion of someone who cares for them ... someone who is willing to sacrifice for them ... someone who is ready to stand with them against the injustices of this world.

And that, my friends ... is what this little church is all about ... sending out new disciples and apostles into the world ... like Benjamin will do one day ... and believe me ... with the grace of God ... he and all of the children we love and support today ... will help bring the Kingdom of God that much closer to a reality in this world for all of God's children.

So ... just like the Hebrew people ... we are being called to stop and reflect on where we are going ... on what we are being called to do ... particularly in light of Benjamin's baptism. What should this day call for us to do ... where do we begin?

I believe the answer is written simply by the prophet ... because Micah tells us precisely how God would like this to happen. The words come from the eighth verse of chapter 6 ... and they still send shivers up my back ... What does the Lord require of you ... but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

"Do Justice, love kindness, Walk humbly with your God." Those were the very words from Micah that were the theme of the 218th General Assembly of the PCUSA last year in California. They are words that should literally shape who and what we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. They are words that call us to action ... that call us to reflect not on ourselves but on others ... and in particular ... on the children of God ... wherever they may be.

God tells us to do justice ... I'm not talking about the kind of justice that comes from those ads on the back of the phone book where certain attorneys would love to mediate justice for us in terms of getting a large cash settlement.

No ... to do justice in the eyes of God is to stand side by side with anyone ... any child of God ... who is treated unfairly ... who is abused ... who is exploited ... who is manipulated ... whose very existence in this world is dragged down through the mud of despair and poverty and hopelessness ... and to bring hope and love and compassion back into their lives.

We do that here in this church in our support of Hagar's House, the shelter for women and children ... through the Clifton Men's Shelter ... through our sandwich making for the Central Presbyterian Men's Shelter ... through our support of Our House, the wonderful day care center for homeless children right here on our church grounds.

And when we support these missions ... side by side with the children and youth of this church ... we are growing disciples who will one day take our place and change this world with God's grace even more than God has through us.

Then God tells us to love kindness ... we are called to share our love with everyone and anyone and we should do it all the time ... even when it interferes with our precious schedules ... even when it means sharing a bit more of our money ... or our time.

To love kindness is to change the "me attitude" to the "you attitude" by giving something of yourself to someone else ... you do it by stopping long enough to actually listen to someone who needs a caring ear ... you do it by offering someone at least some kind of assistance ... maybe just

a MARTA token ... maybe just a meal ... and then by take one more step ... by praying with them for God's support instead of just pushing them out the door of the church. Kindness is never measured by just the sharing of our precious resources ... it is measured by the compassion of our hearts.

And finally ... God tells us to walk humbly with our Lord. To be honest, I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases these words in *The Message*. He tells us ... "Don't' take yourself too seriously, take God seriously."

In essence, when we walk humbly with our Lord we give up any notion that we are in control ... instead we follow and trust that Christ will lead us in the way we are to go. Like every child of God ... we, too, are in desperate need of a Savior.

Wendy Dewberry and the youth have been recently studying these verses. I would like to share with you how she believes they have come to know these words written by Micah ... and it's meaning in terms of not only on this morning's baptism of Benjamin ... but in the remembrance of all of our baptisms ...

"We live into our baptismal vows by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. When we baptize Benjamin, we proclaim that all children are claimed by God. When we claim this child as part of our family—as part of God's family—we claim all children as part of our family, and therefore we strive to make their world a more just place, where they can not just exist, but thrive. In that way, we are truly reflecting God's love. And so we do justice. We create places for children we know and don't know to be able to thrive in the same way the children in our homes do. Because they're all our children. To do any less—to turn our eyes away or care any less is to neglect God's requirement of us and not live into the hope of Kingdom, which Jesus speaks. And we're people of hope." (Wendy Dewberry, DCE, Columbia Presbyterian Church, October 2009)

Let justice shine in all your ways,
Let loving kindness rule your days,
That, as this earthly path you trod,
You shall walk humbly with your God.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.